The Mindsets of a Leader

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By Modesto A. Maidique and Nathan J. Hiller

One of the most revealing questions leaders can ask themselves is “Whom do I serve?” Their answers to that question say more about their style of leadership and field of influence than their personality traits or emotional intelligence does. And if they make that choice thoughtfully, it snaps their efforts into focus, helping them put together better teams, avoid disasters, and create lasting impact within the organization and beyond.

In recent years, we have interviewed leaders from more than 80 organizations in a variety of industries. (See “About the Research,” p. 78.) Based on those conversations and drawing from research in both cognitive leadership and developmental psychology, we have identified six leadership mindsets: We call them the Sociopath, the Egoist, the Chameleon, the Dynamo, the Builder, and the Transcender. Each one represents a set of assumptions and beliefs about the nature and purpose of leadership — and about how best to wield it.

In our experience studying and working with leaders, we’ve found that they rarely possess a single mindset. Instead, they have a portfolio of mindsets, and each one — as well as the overall mix, which varies from person to person — influences a leader’s decisions and behaviors and can thus alter the direction, focus, and performance of the organization. (See “Sample Profiles for Two Senior Executives,” p. 79.) This article examines each mindset in turn and provides some guidance on how people can better understand and make the most of their own portfolios.

Serving No One: The Sociopath
The most limiting and dangerous mindset — the Sociopath — can be found in individuals who exhibit a reckless disregard for anyone besides themselves. Though we aren’t using this term in a pathological sense or trying to diagnose anyone, we’ve observed that leaders with a large dose of this mindset display certain traits commonly associated with antisocial personality disorder, such as lack of empathy and obliviousness.
to the emotional and physical pain of others. They are also typically charming and highly effective at manipulating others and the organization’s systems (at least for a while).

Consider former Turing Pharmaceuticals CEO Martin Shkreli, who destroyed his career and his company’s reputation with his habitually exploitative behavior after becoming, by some measures, very successful. Emails show that after raising the price of the prescription drug Daraprim by more than 5,000%, Shkreli lauded his move as a “handsome investment,” delighting in the prospect of higher short-term profits at the expense of patients’ health.4

The Sociopath mindset can exist at any level in an organization. Perhaps you have worked for someone whose behavior fits the profile. Such ruthless bosses ignore the pain of others, but they often skillfully use others to get what they want through pressure, coercion, and trickery. Their reliance on fear as a motivator sometimes delivers short-term compliance and results, and their smarts, charm, and manipulation may get them promoted. Their ethics are transient, and they perceive themselves as exempt from the rules.

We have found that there is no practical way to work effectively with people who have strong Sociopath mindsets without risking disaster — even if they’re high performers. They are highly unlikely to change.

Serving Oneself: The Egoist

Leaders with predominantly Egoist mindsets are driven by their own accumulation of wealth, power, and status. At each turn, they ask, “What’s
in it for me?” An organization can grow and profit under someone like this, but only if its interests align with the leader’s.

In fairness, many people are influenced by wealth, power, and status goals — we are not suggesting that they always lead to problems. However, unless these objectives are offset by other considerations, a disproportionate Egoist mindset at the top leadership level can destroy an organization’s culture. When a leader is utterly self-absorbed, others take that as a behavioral cue. Collective action and helping behaviors — crucial for an organization’s long-term success — fall by the wayside.

In our leadership development work, we came to know the director of a high-tech components manufacturer — someone who had all the hallmarks of an Egoist mindset. After performing well as a motivated salesman and running a small team, he was promoted to a more visible leadership role and eventually revealed himself to be a greedy self-promoter rather than someone who models behaviors that would benefit the team. Based on his example, the sales staff fell into disarray as team members, mimicking their leader’s style, pilfered leads from each other and withheld valuable information from colleagues. Customers began to drift away.

The ambition and self-focus of leaders with a strong Egoist mindset can enable them to get ahead, but then they often struggle to build a team, and they do little to develop others. Team members think, “Why should I do what’s best for the organization?” when they know the leader will look for ways to take all the credit.

Unlike those with strong Sociopath tendencies, such as little compunction about hurting others, leaders with an Egoist bent simply pursue their own personal interests and rarely see the damage they do. But under the right circumstances of clearly defined goals and careful monitoring, organizations can channel the Egoist mindset for good by ensuring that leaders’ individual goals are well-aligned with theirs.

Serving Anyone: The Chameleon

Leaders who largely adopt a Chameleon mindset are extremely adaptable. Although they rarely reach the CEO level, they can work their way up the organization by pleasing other people in power. They are typically characterized by a combination of low self-esteem and a strong need to be liked. As a result, they often lack courage and struggle with tough decisions.

Those with dominant Chameleon tendencies can be helpful in advancing the organization’s strategic initiatives. But don’t expect them to make important judgments when faced with opposition or to ask challenging questions. Moreover, don’t be surprised if they suddenly begin to align themselves with an emerging set of leaders. As they see it, they need to serve and please whomever is most important on a given day. They typically neither articulate nor defend a set of deeply held values, leading others to conclude that they don’t have a backbone. Because those with strong Chameleon mindsets don’t act with true conviction, people will not follow them into battle. Not surprisingly, they can be easily manipulated by anyone who knows they will go along with those in power.

One leader we knew — a senior manager at a construction firm — largely fit this profile. He was dedicated, highly educated, affable, perceptive, and bright. But he didn’t have much influence in the organization. Even when he had good ideas, he didn’t stand up for what he thought and wasn’t respected. People felt they couldn’t count on him to provide an honest assessment. When he reluctantly tried to lead a new initiative for the company, his exaggerated focus on trying to please his superiors (who wanted him to own a new project) and his inability to fight for his ideas when he received pushback meant that the project never got off the ground. As a result, he further lost credibility as a leader.

It’s a long process to set up someone like this for leadership growth and success. One strategy is to reward and praise behavioral courage and risk-taking while de-emphasizing compliance and harmony.

Serving Goals: The Dynamo

A Dynamo mindset helps people execute strategy consistently and, in many cases, flawlessly. Leaders with this dominant mindset are seen as superstars. They tend to exceed their sales quotas, deliver large projects on time, and generate profits. They excel at mobilizing resources and the efforts of others. Their colleagues depend on them, and they exist at junior and senior levels of every organization we have studied.

Those with a largely Dynamo mindset also have an Achilles’ heel, however. In their drive to reach a
goal, they can lose sight of the broader mission. We saw this happen at Hewlett-Packard Co. when CEO Mark Hurd set his sights on increasing HP’s stock price. The price did rise by more than 110% over the course of his tenure between 2006 and 2010. But it eventually became clear that the only way the company was able to achieve this gain was by slashing spending on research and development and infrastructure, cutting deeply into its technological and product strength.

In the early 1980s, HP cofounder David Packard accepted an invitation from Modesto Maidique, one of this article’s authors, to appear as a guest lecturer for a class at Stanford University. Asked to explain HP’s early success, Packard’s response was simple: “I guess we found a way to make a better product.” Behind this seemingly straightforward answer, however, were a number of carefully calculated factors laid out in the long-term vision of HP’s founders. New product success was, in Packard’s eyes, reliant on specific organizational traits, including clarity of purpose, creativity, manufacturing prowess, and marketing skills. Those with a dominant Dynamo mindset like Hurd’s may work hard, but they frequently lack the wisdom and long-term perspective of leaders like Packard. In pursuit of admirable goals, many fail to consider unintended consequences and whether their efforts serve the organization’s long-term interests.

**Serving the Institution: The Builder**

Leaders who largely adopt a Builder mindset promote the collective good of the organization. Among the CEOs in this category are General Motors Co.’s Alfred P. Sloan, IBM’s Tom Watson Jr., and Apple Inc.’s Steve Jobs. This isn’t to say that such leaders don’t act partly out of self-interest, but building the organization is the primary focus. They consider the entire pie — not just their favorite slice — and they manage for the long term rather than getting distracted by short-term profit and stock market valuations.

While you might assume that those with a strong Builder mindset are always senior executives, we saw them in various roles and functions in our research. For example, the unit manager who formulates a broad and lasting departmental vision that others want to follow has a Builder mindset. So does an athletic coach who develops a strong, cohesive, loyal team and a deep bench of leaders. Indeed, most people, no matter what their role, can strive toward building an organization that carries out a broader vision.

**Serving Society: The Transcender**

Those who embrace a Transcender mindset think even more broadly. They try to maximize value for many stakeholders both within and beyond the organization from wherever they sit (they aren’t always senior executives). They bridge disconnected parties and reframe the organization’s purpose and goals in terms of social good. Those with strong Transcender tendencies understand how seemingly unrelated parts of the whole fit together. They are able to manage complexity.

In the sociopolitical sphere, Nelson Mandela, who became South Africa’s first black president after spending 27 years in prison, is a prime example. He rose above racial, tribal, and class hatred to steer his divided country in a new direction.

Another example of a leader with a strong Transcender mindset is Alvah H. Chapman Jr., the late chairman and CEO of the large media company Knight Ridder Inc. and former publisher of the *Miami Herald* (and the benefactor of a chaired executive profiles are based on composites of executives from multiple technology companies.)
professorship that Modesto Maidique holds). On Aug. 26, 1992, two days after Hurricane Andrew struck South Florida, Chapman asked 30 community leaders to join him in responding to the ravages of what was at the time the costliest hurricane in U.S. history. Everyone Chapman contacted said yes. Since then, We Will Rebuild, a community coalition aimed at rebuilding homes, lives, and infrastructure, has been a model for other disaster-stricken regions.6

To be sure, business leaders can’t ignore traditional success measures. However, those with Transcender leanings tend to look beyond the amount of profits and shareholder value achieved and consider how they were achieved. They don’t always succeed, nor do their efforts escape criticism. Indeed, they sometimes focus too much on spearheading change at the wrong times and in the wrong ways, putting critical short-term goals in jeopardy. But they can mitigate that risk by surrounding themselves with a cadre of leaders with Builder, Dynamo, and even Egoist mindsets. In public companies, the pressures for short-term results also provide a counterbalance to some of the potential difficulties of a Transcender mindset.

What’s the Right Mix?
Leaders are complex, multifaceted, and evolving beings. Although they usually rely on one or two dominant mindsets at any point in time, individuals each have their own blend of several mindsets, shaped by their cognitive styles, personalities, values, and experiences.7 Consider, for example, two leaders who are similarly driven to achieve performance goals. Both display a Dynamo mindset, but let’s say one of them also has strong Egoist tendencies. The leader with Egoist leanings is likely to prioritize an increase in power, status, or wealth — and will pursue the organization’s goals in a way that brings about maximum individual benefit. A desire for power may lead him or her to centralize decision-making as well. Now suppose the other Dynamo has Builder tendencies. That leader, by contrast, will be more concerned about achieving the mission of the collective than about raising his or her own profile.

Given the infinite number of permutations and the importance of context as a factor in success, we have yet to find a blend of mindsets that works across the board, and we believe such a formula probably does not exist. Indeed, the composition of a person’s portfolio is apt to change in response to new circumstances.8 Nevertheless, as you might expect, our data and analysis suggest that leaders tend to be perceived as more strategic and influential, have teams that produce more innovative solutions, and create more value for their organizations when they have larger proportions of Dynamo, Builder, and Transcender in their portfolios, and lower proportions of Egoist, Chameleon, and Sociopath.

### WHOM DO YOU SERVE?
Your answer to this simple question says a lot about your leadership style — and chances are, it’s not always the same.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MINDSET</th>
<th>SOCIOPATH</th>
<th>EGOIST</th>
<th>CHAMELEON</th>
<th>DYNAMO</th>
<th>BUILDER</th>
<th>TRANSCENDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Serves</td>
<td>Ultimately, no one</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Anyone</td>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Society (and institution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Displays monomaniacal interest in domination, perceives self as superior, and believes that rules do not apply to him/her</td>
<td>Maximizes benefits to himself/herself as the top priority</td>
<td>Adapts to surroundings and serves whichever group he/she belongs to</td>
<td>Executes a clear strategy or set of goals commanded from above (such as a boss, board, or law) or sometimes a self-imposed goal without broader consideration</td>
<td>Makes decisions and leads in ways aimed at building a lasting institution</td>
<td>Targets institutional success while (or by) seeking benefits for the entire ecosystem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operative question</td>
<td>So what if it causes injury or pain to others?</td>
<td>What’s in it for me in terms of wealth, status, or power?</td>
<td>How can I please others?</td>
<td>What must I do to accomplish our immediate goals?</td>
<td>How can I best advance the interests of my organization?</td>
<td>What is best for society — and the world at large?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The overall picture, as we have observed, is not static. People are capable of continued development (although nothing is assured), and their career and life priorities change over time. As we mature, we are more likely to be concerned with a legacy and making a lasting or even transcendent impact.

As scholars of leadership development have noted, such changes are rarely linear or easy to predict. Some shifting occurs naturally, in the wake of new work and life experiences. A young leader with a strong Chameleon mindset may eventually gain the self-confidence to stand up and be heard at work after taking on a leadership role (or observing strong leadership) in another life domain. Deliberate shifts are also possible. They begin when leaders start to ask not only, “Whom do I now serve?” but also, “Whom do I seek to serve?” Rather than “finding” their purpose, disciplined leaders take an active role in building it and continually reshaping it. This isn’t to say that adjusting one’s portfolio mix is easy, but it can be done.

Sudden changes in one’s leadership style usually aren’t necessary unless there’s a crisis. In most situations, leaders will start to emphasize a new mindset (for example, the Builder) while letting other mindsets shrink.

What Kind of Leader Are You?

In the course of presenting our model to individuals and groups, we realized that a self-assessment tool would be useful in helping people understand themselves as leaders. Partnering with Daniel Newman, an industrial/organizational psychology professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, we developed a set of leadership scenarios, along with response choices that map to the various mindsets in our framework. By filling out the survey at www.leadershipmindsets.org, you can see the mix of mindsets that influence your own leadership style.

Once you have a better understanding of your profile, consider discussing it with other leaders, trusted colleagues, or friends so that you can calibrate your leadership actions against how others see you and against your ideal portfolio. Search for discrepancies and design a plan to align your leadership style with your long- and short-term goals. You might also want to talk to leaders whose styles you would like to emulate. What ideas do they have for expanding your impact or making adjustments?

Finally, ask yourself how you would like to be remembered as a leader. This can help you refocus your goals and behaviors so that you can take control of your own destiny.

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REFERENCES

5. Mike Krzyzewski, Duke University’s legendary basketball coach, comes to mind as someone with a dominant Builder mindset. From 1980, when he became the head men’s coach, to the end of the 2017-2018 season, Duke won five NCAA championships and was in the Final Four 12 times; his overall record at Duke is 1,027-279.
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