Developing Constructive Leader Impact

By Robert A. Cooke, Ph.D., and Linda Sharkey, Ph.D.

Almost by definition, leaders have a significant influence on the people around them—including the goals they set, the effort they make to reach those goals, and the way in which they approach their work.

Leaders have an impact on the motivation of people and on the culture of their organizations and, as a result, on individual performance and organizational effectiveness. While impact can be subtle and seemingly difficult to quantify, we have found that feedback to leaders on their impact can be key to motivating and guiding their development efforts.

Training and development programs can enhance the effectiveness of leaders by helping them to have a more positive, constructive impact on the people around them. A *constructive* impact is attained when leaders:

- Encourage and enable organizational members to approach tasks and interact with others in positive ways that are consistent with personal needs for growth and satisfaction;
- Reinforce and inspire their subordinates (and others with whom they work) to demonstrate a balanced concern for people and tasks, focus on the attainment of both personal and organizational goals, and work to reach those goals through cooperative efforts; and, more specifically
- Promote achievement-oriented, self-actualizing, encouraging, and affiliative behaviors throughout the organization.

However, leaders often unknowingly have a *defensive* impact—and drive or implicitly require the people around them to think and behave in more self-protective and less productive ways. These defensive behaviors can be either task-oriented and relatively aggressive or people-oriented and more passive. When their impact is *passive/defensive*, leaders:

- Compel and implicitly require organizational members to interact with one another in self-protective ways that will not threaten their personal security;
- Expect and reinforce others around them to emphasize people at the expense of tasks (e.g., withhold negative, yet necessary, feedback), subordinate themselves to the organization (follow rules even when they're wrong), and play it safe rather than take reasonable risks that could enhance performance; and
- Promote approval-oriented, conventional, dependent, and avoidant behaviors throughout the organization.

When their impact is *aggressive/defensive*, leaders

- Drive others to approach tasks in forceful ways to protect their status and security;
- Reinforce and require their subordinates and peers to emphasize tasks and short-term performance (rather than the interests of people), narrowly pursue their own objectives over those of other members and units; and compete rather than cooperate; and
- Promote oppositional, power-oriented, competitive, and perfectionistic behaviors throughout the organization.

Certain leaders promote both passive and aggressive behaviors and inadvertently create a generalized defensive culture—which almost certainly makes their organizations less than adaptable and engaging from the perspective of members. Rather than fostering the customer-focused and results-oriented behaviors associated with constructive norms, this type of culture reduces motivation, compromises problem solving, increases business costs due to unnecessary bureaucracy, and leads to questionable—and sometimes unethical—decisions.

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Managers and others in leadership positions generally do not have a clear picture of the impact they're having, even if it's strongly negative. Using a feedback tool called Leadership/Impact, we provide them with a data-based summary of not only their current impact but also the impact they ideally would like to have on others.

The figure on this page represents the type of feedback provided and shows the composite ideal impact reported by approximately 3,900 managers in organizations based in the United States.

The lengthy extensions at the top of the profile portray their preference for a strong constructive impact; the short extensions along the styles toward the bottom reflect their preference to minimize any defensive impact.

Though from many different firms in a variety of industries, the leaders in this sample demonstrate strong agreement regarding their preference for a constructive impact.

In fact, there is much more consistency across managers with respect to their ideal impact (self-reported) than their actual impact (as reported by people around them). Possibly more importantly, their actual impact is significantly less constructive and more defensive than their preferred impact.
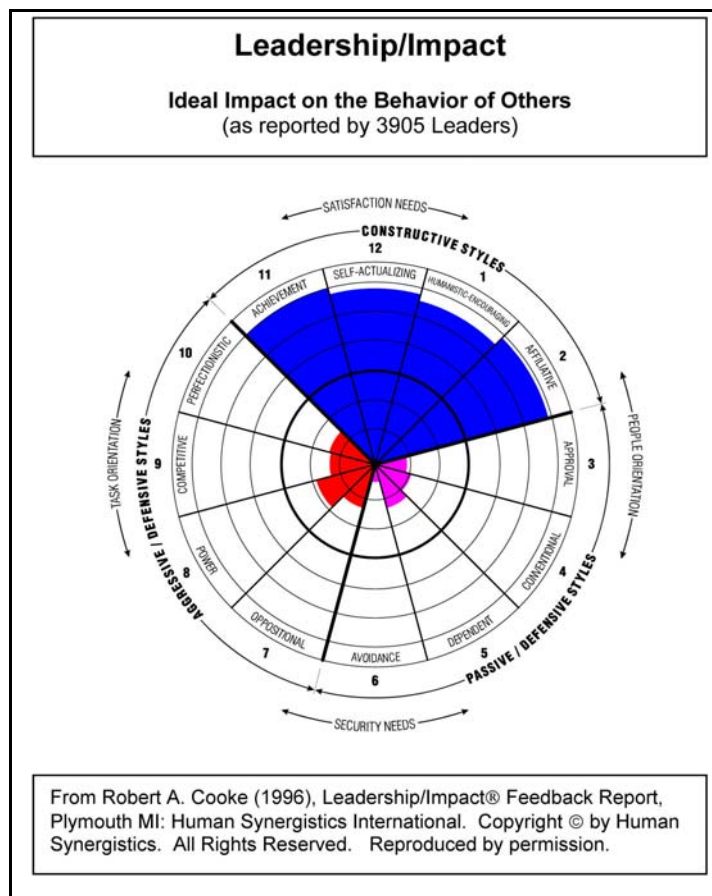
The actual impact of the typical leader is represented by the heavy circle in the profile; this circle, the third concentric ring from the center, graphically re-flects the 50th percentile or the median score for leaders along each of the impact styles. The gap between the current and preferred impact of the typical leader presents an important opportunity for training and development. Such gaps can serve also to motivate growth and development.

Most leaders view the performance of their people as paramount, dislike differences between their current and preferred impact, and express commitment to reducing the gaps.

At the same time, gaps between day-to-day versus "peak performance" impact can serve to ensure managers that they can become great leaders. This is exemplified by leadership development programs at GE. Managers participating in programs conducted by GE Commercial Finance are asked to focus on a high performance situation and to complete the Leadership/Impact survey in terms of their impact during that period.

Consistent with the design of the program, this appreciative inquiry strategy enables them to reflect on their best, understand that they have the capacity to demonstrate great leadership, and apply insights from those peak experiences to everyday activities. It is important to note that, based on surveys completed by over 250 managers, peak periods are characterized almost exclusively by a constructive rather than defensive impact. This is consistently the case even though these leaders represent countries

Leadership/Impact

Ideal Impact on the Behavior of Others
(as reported by 3905 Leaders)

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(in five continents) that differ markedly with respect to individualism, power distance, and other societal values potentially relevant to leadership and organizational effectiveness.

Development programs offered by other organizations motivate change by sharing research findings on the impact of leaders. Such findings parallel those obtained for the sample of leaders mentioned above. For example, leaders with a strong constructive impact are:

- Better educated and more experienced
- At higher salary levels
- Less stressed, more confident, better learners and more effective than leaders who do not encourage constructive behaviors

"The most important motivating factor might be that the best predictor of impact is leadership strategy."

Factors such as pay possibly facilitate and lead to a constructive impact; more likely, however, leaders with a constructive impact are effective, and are rewarded with raises and promotions. While these findings potentially enhance managers' interest in development, the most important motivating factor might be that the best predictor of impact is *leadership strategy*. Unlike traits or personality characteristics, leadership strategies can be changed and developmental efforts can lead to significant improvements in impact and effectiveness.

Within the organizations studied, the managers with the most constructive impact are those who lead in "prescriptive" ways. That is, they guide others toward goals and outcomes, focus on what's desired, and promote and facilitate productive behaviors.

In contrast, managers with a more defensive impact use more "restrictive" leadership strategies. They focus on what's not desired, constrain the actions of others, and implicitly or explicitly prohibit certain behaviors. For example, when monitoring activities and performance, restrictive leaders manage primarily by exception and focus on mistakes, deviations, and shortcomings. This is in contrast to prescriptive leaders who manage by excellence, focus more often on what is being done right, and in turn create a constructive culture.

Longitudinal studies demonstrate that prescriptive strategies and, as a result, the constructive impact of managers can be developed and enhanced as part of coaching, succession planning efforts, and leadership development programs. However, experience at GE confirms that such programs must be tailored to the organization and its business environment. This requires, among other things, engaging the organization's most effective leaders in the process at the earliest stage possible—and keeping them involved as instructors and coaches.

To ensure success, programs must also be built on principles, frameworks and techniques (e.g., action learning, futuring, appreciative inquiry, systems thinking) that are consistent with the culture of the organization and likely to be accepted by participants. Valid and relevant survey instruments should be used for feedback purposes and complemented by interviews, personal analyses of peak performance periods, and other pre-work and data collection initiatives.

Finally, follow-up is absolutely critical to motivating change and demonstrating improvement; in the absence of follow-up activities, leaders are unlikely to develop prescriptive strategies, influence others to adopt constructive styles, or succeed in improving the performance of the organization. ☙

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