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ByInvitation

Why smart leaders fail

What makes a good leader? Beyond cognitive ability, having a good sense of situational judgment is critical

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For The Straits Times

In Singapore, when leaders in the public service or government-linked organisations are found wanting, people in their private conversations sometimes go: "Those scholars..."

In Singapore, "scholars" often refer to academically excellent students who take up government-funded scholarships to study at top universities and return to high-flying careers in the public sector.

When people make remarks about "scholars", one negative connotation is that having high academic ability (indicated by top academic grades) has caused one to think and act in ways that reflect poor leadership and ineffective performance.

But does top academic ability actually imply poor leadership?

And in Singapore's context, does the current system of selecting and developing leaders rely too much on academic (and cognitive) abilities and is inadequate in capturing critical non-academic factors?

More generally, does having high academic ability help or hurt work performance, or when does it help or hurt?

Answers to these questions have implications for practical decisions, such as selecting leaders or employees, designing systems and programmes to appraise individuals and develop leaders, and when or who to give more or fewer leadership responsibilities to.

MORE OPEN DISCUSSIONS

These questions on leadership and other topics were discussed at the recent Behavioural Sciences Institute Conference, attended by 300 participants from the public, private and people sectors.

Held two months ago with the theme "Much more than academic abilities", the conference proceedings have been documented in a book published by World Scientific.

A week after the conference, Mr Chan Chun Sing, the Minister-in-charge of the Public Service, said in Parliament on Feb 28 that educational qualifications, while useful as a "valid proxy", will not be sufficient for selecting future leaders in the Singapore public service.

He added that the Government is looking for individuals with initiative, creativity and the ability to be a team player.

And just last week, in his speech at the administrative service promotion ceremony, Minister Chan elaborated on some non-academic attributes, including integrity and accountability.

He urged the public service to review the way it selects and develops its leaders.

He also noted that the heads of the civil service and the Public Service Commission have already initiated various streams of work to do so.

We can expect more open discussions on leadership in Singapore, not just in the public service but also in other sectors. To shed more light rather than generate mere heat on the issues, we should draw on experiences in practice and evidence from scientific research.

EXPERIENCE AND EVIDENCE

First, consider our personal experiences.

Many who have interacted with different leaders can name leaders they look up to, as well as those they would stay away from.

While leaders may be similarly and highly intelligent – academically speaking – our experiences tell us that they can differ quite widely on the spectrum of leader effectiveness as we compare and contrast them.

At the same time, those familiar with how the public sector selects and develops its leaders would know that there are real efforts to look beyond academic abilities or achievements.

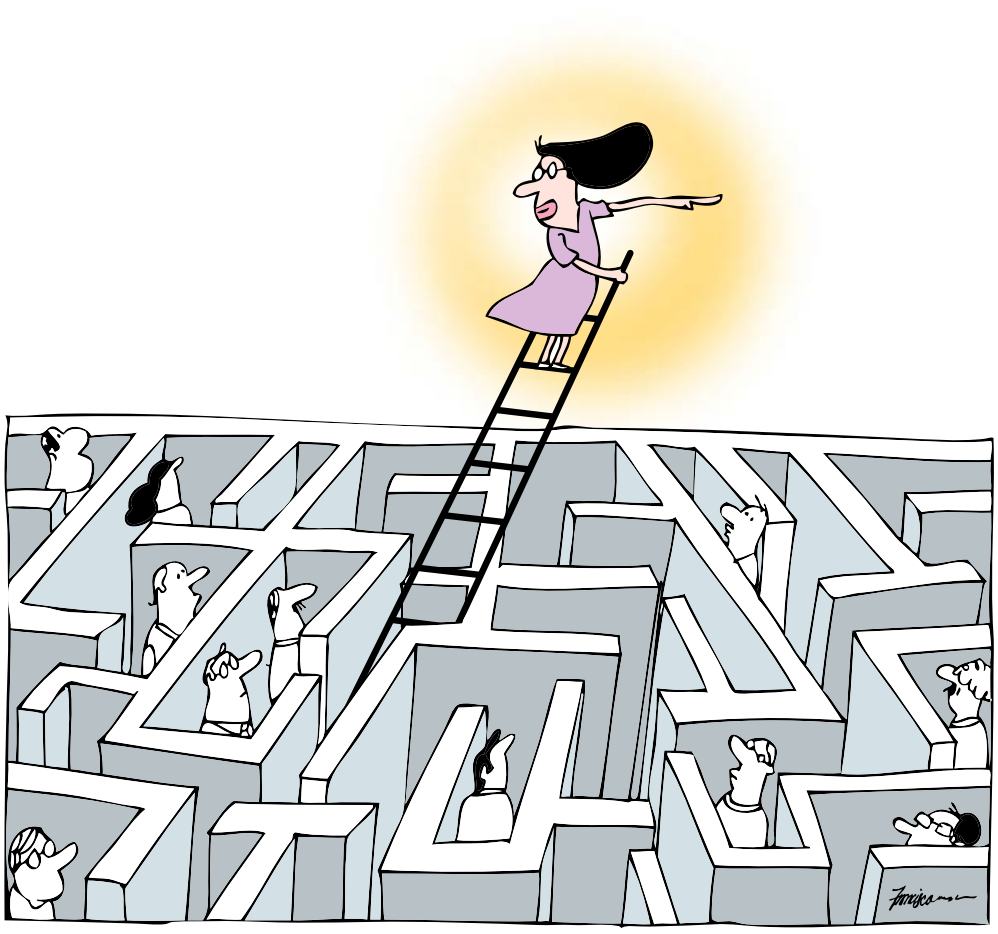
Values, motivations, personality traits and other non-academic attributes are taken seriously. They are measured and considered, although in varying degrees across organisations.

Put simply, many could say from their personal experiences that leaders share similar traits but are also highly diverse.

Second, we know a lot about leader effectiveness from established evidence produced by scientific research and consulting practice, both globally and locally.

Academic abilities are not just important in school settings – research has established that they are also critical for leadership and performance in problem-solving contexts involving intellectual demands.

Examples of such demands are logical thinking, abstract thinking and academic-related knowledge such as knowing how to interpret numerical data.



But research has also shown that, very often, academic abilities cannot be the only or even the most important contributory factor for successful performance.

In addition, academic ability does not determine if a person also has strong non-academic attributes that lead to good performance; it is independent of such attributes.

Indeed, there is clear evidence that many critical processes and outcomes at work are not dependent, or are less dependent, on academic abilities.

Examples include work engagement, team functioning, innovation, crisis management, adaptive performance and resilience.

Finally, leader effectiveness is highly dependent on various non-academic abilities and attributes, which can interact in important ways to affect leader attitudes and actions and, in turn, influence people's reactions and support. This is a critical point, so let me illustrate with research that I conducted several years ago in Singapore.

JUDGING PRACTICAL SITUATIONS

In one study of public-sector officers (published in the Journal Of Applied Psychology), I used validated instruments to measure each officer's proactive personality and situational judgment effectiveness.

Proactive personality is the disposition to speak up, seek opportunities, initiate things and get things done, persevere until one sees changes occur, and act to change the status quo situation.

Situational judgment effectiveness, or SJE, refers to an individual's ability to make effective judgments in practical situations.

It involves attending to the important cues in a given practical situation, making sense of what the situation means and how it may evolve, and making decisions and responding to the situation effectively.

I also measured the officers' work outcomes such as job performance, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour.

The study showed that the same results were replicated across all these and other important work outcomes.

I not only looked at whether an officer was high on proactive personality and SJE, but also assessed how effective or ineffective such traits were in their work outcomes.

When an officer with a proactive personality achieves good work outcomes, it is considered adaptive to be high on that proactive trait. When being proactive results in poor outcomes, then being high on the trait is considered maladaptive.

Here is the key finding:

Whether being high on proactive personality is adaptive or maladaptive (meaning whether it helps or hurts the work outcomes) is dependent on how high or low one's level of SJE is.

Among officers who were high on SJE, the more proactive ones did better than the less proactive ones. But among those who were low on SJE, the more proactive ones did worse than the less proactive ones.

In other words, being proactive actually hurts officers who are not effective at judging situations.

This might seem to be counterintuitive until common sense kicks in: A highly proactive officer who wants to effect change at work, for example, will not succeed if he has poor SJE because he is not able to understand what matters more or most in the practical situation and relevant work environment.

He may, for example, not realise that the organisational structure, process or people involved are not suited or ready for that change he wants to introduce.

The practical implications are clearly serious. It means we cannot just select or reward individuals who are highly proactive.

Being more proactive is positive only if the individuals are also effective in judging situations. If they are ineffective in judging situations (low on SJE), then it is worse if they are more proactive.

SITUATIONAL JUDGMENT MATTERS

Like proactive personality, top academic ability can help or hurt, depending on one's level of SJE.

High levels of academic ability and proactivity certainly help those who also have high SJE.

But an academically smart person who is proactive but has poor SJE can be a liability when put in top leadership positions.

It is not difficult to have leaders who are both academically smart and proactive – most leaders in Singapore already are.

But we need to pay much more attention to SJE when selecting and developing leaders.

This point is relevant to the effectiveness of political leaders, regardless of the country they are governing.

Take the example of citizens feeling that they do not have a say in decisions that affect them because they perceive that an important decision or policy lacks transparency.

If political leaders fail to address this critical aspect in the situation or even identify it, then there will be trust erosion and some of their proactive behaviour may backfire.

That is why, before proactively galvanising citizens to work towards a goal or explaining why they need to change their mindsets, political leaders should put on their SJE hat and address citizens' concerns about the policymaking process.

My key point in this essay is this: When it comes to leadership across all sectors, it really does not matter what the person's position in the organisation is or who the person is – the ability to judge practical situations effectively is critical.

An effective leader attends to appropriate cues in a situation and focuses on matters that really matter.

So, when assessing why leaders fail, it is not helpful to have a knee-jerk reaction against "those scholars".

Instead, figure out the factors that make this leader fail in this organisation, and then learn how to improve the leadership selection and development system so that we have leaders with much more than academic abilities and proactive traits.

We need leaders who can effectively sense and judge practical situations – the mood of a people, the culture of an organisation, strengths and weaknesses, and what needs to change – and catalyse change effectively.

This will help us to effect positive changes with meaningful impact for ourselves, those around us and our society.

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