

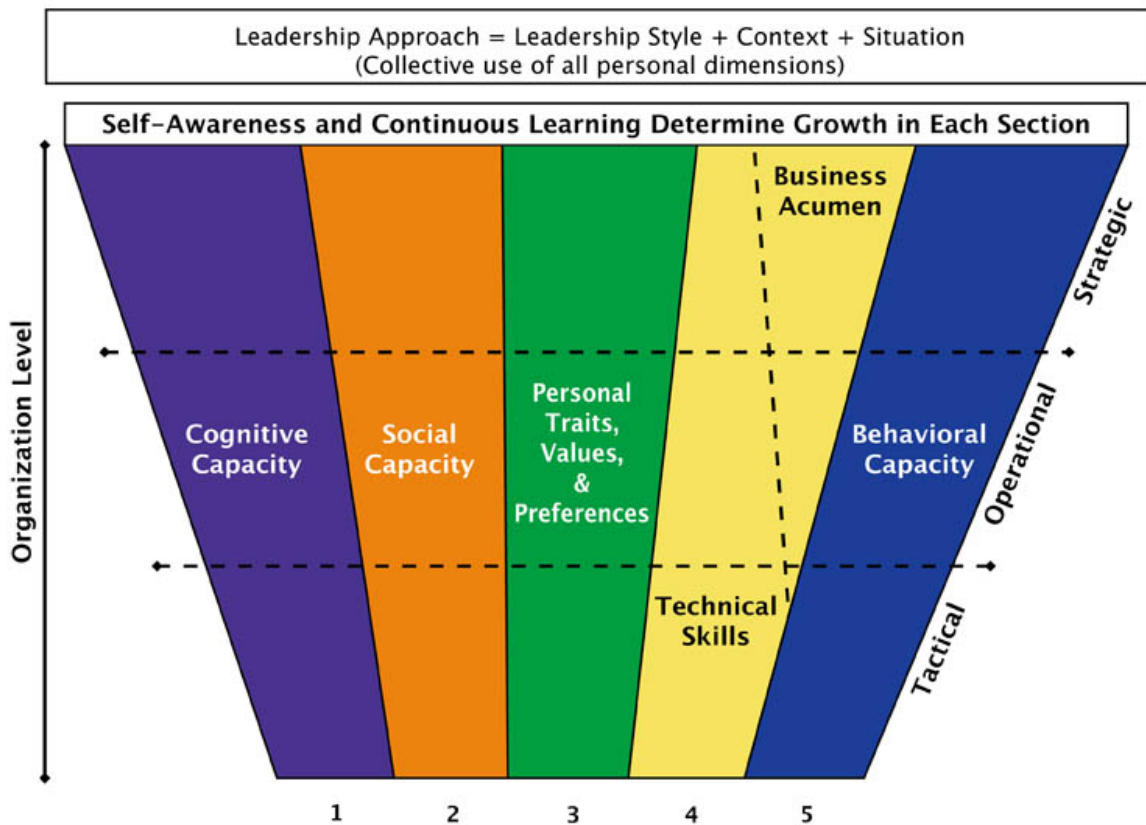
The **Browning Leadership Institute**

Senior Leader Readiness—Personal Dimensions

Your *Personal Dimensions* represent the collective capacities, competencies, attributes, values, expertise, experience, organizational knowledge, judgment, and wisdom you bring to the senior-level position. The personal characteristics, skills, and abilities you need at the senior level are reflected by five different, but overlapping, domains as depicted in Figure 1, including Cognitive Capacity; Social Capacity; Personal Traits, Values, and Preferences; Business Acumen and Technical Skills; and Behavioral Capacity. As you move from the lower levels to the senior level, the requirements for each of the three capacities, business acumen, and—to a lesser extent—personal traits, values and preferences increases. While some environmental factors may potentially stifle growth, the graphic illustrates that growth in each of the personal dimensions is primarily determined by your self-awareness, and both organizationally driven efforts (e.g., training, stretch assignments) and individually driven efforts (e.g., continuous learning activities, self-development). The following is a brief overview of these five domains.

Figure 1: Personal Dimensions Framework

The Strategic Leader: Personal Dimensions Cross-Section



The comprehensiveness, depth, and quality of your personal dimensions—and how well you integrate and apply them—will go a long way toward determining your personal and organizational success at any organizational level, but especially at the senior level.

I go in much greater detail—with examples and how you can expand your capacity in each personal dimension—in my forthcoming 2019 book, *The Truth about Senior Leadership*.

Cognitive Capacity

Effective cognitive capacity at the senior level involves maximizing all thinking skills in order to develop and employ complex mental models and frames of reference to conceptualize, analyze, evaluate, and create solutions to complex and often wicked problems. Ron Iverson, then CEO of LGS Innovations, argues, “The growing complexity of the environment necessitates an increase in your cognitive capacities.” You certainly used these same thinking processes and exercised these same skills in previous leadership experiences; however, the scope and quality (power) of the mental models used in employing these skills at the senior leadership level is what sets them apart from your past leadership experiences.

Cognitive capacity includes, but is not limited to, those thinking skills and abilities listed in Table 1. Mastery and exercise of all or many of these thinking skills is what facilitates effective problem solving and decision making necessary to be a successful strategic senior leader.

Table 1: Skills Associated with Cognitive Capacity

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|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• conceptual capacity• sensemaking (mental models and frames of reference)• understanding indirect effects (multiple order effects of consequential decisions)• metacognition (thinking about how one thinks)• reframing (and perspective taking)• insight/“aha” moments• proactive reasoning• memory quality | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• envisioning• dealing with uncertainty• reducing complexity• recognizing blind spots• identifying personal bias• exercising foresight (anticipating the future —“seeing around corners”)• formulating strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• communicating (both oral and written)• thinking skills (e.g., strategic, systems, creative, critical, deliberate and logical, intuitive, and reflective thinking)• exercising discerning judgment and wisdom• learning and growing capacity• multi-tasking/developing absorptive capacity (ability to process lots of information)• environmental scanning |
|--|--|---|

Social Capacity

Linda Washington, CEO of Team Washington and former Assistant Secretary for Administration, US Department of Transportation, says,

To be an effective strategic leader requires strong interpersonal, social and emotional skills. To exercise influence, to be persuasive, to negotiate effectively you, as the senior leader, must have the capacity to generate respect and mutual trust. I believe that how well you build and sustain rapport with other leaders—both inside and outside organizations—enhances your ability to accomplish your objectives. It is crucial, therefore, that you have a keen appreciation that interpersonal skills are the bedrock skills for influencing people.¹

Social Capacity includes your ability to use your interpersonal and emotional intelligence skills, knowledge, and proficiency with communication technologies to influence, inform, persuade or motivate individuals, groups, and organizations. Sometimes referred to as “soft skills,” these competencies are fundamental to achieving personal and professional success.

Clearly, the ability to build rapport and to establish friendly, collaborative relationships is crucial at the senior level, especially with stakeholders and outside partner organizations over which you lack authority. Interpersonal skills are essential to building and sustaining relationships. As a senior leader, you may make decisions, assign tasks, and give instructions; however, it is through interpersonal skills that you communicate the intent of these decisions.

Good interpersonal and social intelligence skills on your part will lead to increased energy, enthusiasm, and commitment on the part of those doing the work. Social capacity includes but is not limited to such skills and abilities as listed in Table 2. Keep in mind that many of the listed competencies are interrelated to the other four personal dimensions:

The lack of social capacity—poor interpersonal and social skills—can have a major impact on your ability to perform effectively at the senior level and could even lead to career derailment. A few examples of interpersonal leadership derailers include arrogance, betraying trust, defensiveness, failure to build a team, insensitivity to others, and lack of composure.

Lacking or demonstrating inappropriate interpersonal or social skills are serious problems. If you as a senior leader identify or demonstrate these traits, you must take action to

mitigate their influence and impact.

Table 2: Skills Associated with Social Capacity

- **ability to negotiate**
- **collaboration**
- **understanding others**
- **self-awareness**
- **building trust**
- **empathy**
- **passion**
- **motivating others**
- **networking**
- **emotional self-control**
- **aspects of emotional and social intelligence**
- **communication and listening**
- **leveraging power and politics**
- **ability to negotiate**
- **exercising influence and persuasion**
- **boundary-spanning management**
- **cultural awareness** (both organizational and international)
- **interpersonal skills and abilities**
- **emotional competence**
- **establishing rapport**
- **development of senior executive leaders and coaching skills in subordinate leaders**

Personal Traits, Values, and Preferences

Personal traits, values, and preferences are formed early in life and they serve as a foundation for your behavior, even at the senior leadership level.

While each of the five domains widens as a leader moves upwards toward the strategic level, the Personal Traits, Values, and Preferences domain does not reflect as much expansion. This recognizes the general opinion that many people find it difficult to modify their traits, values, and preferences to any great degree. However, with strong self-awareness and focused attention and effort, you can modify your personal characteristics. While each trait, value, and preference listed in Table 3 is essential to success, some traits are more important than others.

For example, the highest rated trait by the senior leaders I interviewed was Integrity (66.6 percent), followed by Inspiring (42 percent), and Ethical (40.5 Percent). “Character is the overarching meta-trait for these key traits. But under it come integrity, honesty, ethics, and courage,”² says then National Defense University President Vice Admiral Ann Rondeau.

Table 3: Elements Associated with Leadership Traits

- | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| • Values | • motivated to lead | • executive presence |
| • ethics and morals | • perseverance | • self-efficacy (willing to take action) |
| • trustworthiness | • integrity | • aspiration level and motivation |
| • resilience | • strong character | • authentic (genuine individual) |
| • drive | • self-disciplined | • accountable |
| • courage | • self-confident | • energy |
| • honest | | |

Based on my experience as well as my discussions with the interviewed senior leaders, I argue that most of the above traits serve as a “baseline” for you as a leader—and most importantly as a senior leader. Any leader not demonstrating integrity, a strong character, and consistent moral and ethical behavior should not be considered for a senior leadership position.

Technical Skills and Business Acumen

Technical Skills are those you learn over time, and which add value to the organization. They include specialized expertise, (particularly as it relates to systems or hardware) you acquired through prior experience and training or acquired during tenure in your current position. Business Acumen is the understanding of how various organizational members' skills and knowledge fit into the organizational structure in a way that adds strategic value. It also includes an understanding of behavior, organizational climate and culture, incentives, and business processes.

As you move up the organizational hierarchy from lower levels, your technical skills (typically developed within a functional area) lessen in importance, whereas, business acumen becomes increasingly more important.

As a senior leader, you manage and lead from a more holistic business perspective—performing strategic analyses, exercising judgment, and making decisions. For example, while you may arrive at the senior level with financial literacy, (e.g., proficiency in cost of goods sold, profit, gross margins), you must also gain the capacity to make sense of the numbers, put them in context, and apply them to the overall organizational strategy.

As Mark Gerencser, former Executive Vice President at Booz Allen Hamilton, argues, “You have to know your extended enterprise and its interdependencies. One of the big mistakes new senior leaders might make is they do not quite understand the unintended consequences of their decisions or actions. When you do not understand the whole enterprise, regardless of what that enterprise is, unintended consequences could be very crippling.”³

General Chuck Krulak, former Vice Chairman for MBNA Financial and Commandant of the US Marine Corps, made it clear that to be successful, “you have to know the business of the business. You don’t have to be smarter than everybody in every particular area, but you’d better know the business of the business.” The point here is not that you should become as knowledgeable as those who work for you, rather, you are able to ask the right, penetrating questions, continue learning, and prevent the proverbial “wool” from being pulled over your eyes.

Table 4 presents examples of competencies related to business acumen.

Table 4: Competencies Related to Business Acumen

- **financial skills and resource allocation**
- **understanding of logistics and supply chain** (including vulnerabilities)
- **ability to “see” what it takes to gain and sustain competitive advantage**
- **business savvy**
- **external and internal strategic acuity**
- **ability to formulate and execute strategy**
- **knowledge of organizational structure and alignment**
- **ability to use business analytics and metrics**
- **technical skills** (usually associated with a function, such as IT, sales, marketing, engineering, etc., or job skills)
- **understanding organizational core competencies and value propositions**
- **discerning mission critical and support processes**
- **ability to leverage people and technology**
- **analyzing market and risk**
- **supporting organizational culture**
- **creating leadership bench strength**

Behavioral Capacity

Behavioral Capacity is your ability to change or adapt habitual behavior patterns in order to embrace new or additional behaviors required to fulfill a senior leadership role. It includes the ability to understand what behavior is most appropriate for the circumstances and context, as well as the ability to bring about desired behaviors in others.

Senior leaders possessing this capacity exhibit flexibility in selecting from a repertoire of appropriate leadership behaviors that exert a positive influence on the strategic environment (both externally and internally).

Table 5 provides examples of behavioral capacities that can enhance your leadership performance at the senior level.

Table 5: Examples of Behavioral Capacity

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|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• simultaneous focus on stability and innovation• inspirational leadership with and through others• ability to make the tough calls• adaptability• openness and flexibility• ability to balance competing leadership roles• having a locus of control• risk taking• a personal belief system• comfortable with uncertainty | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ability to balance multiple work priorities• fortitude for combat and crisis leadership• conscientiousness• decisiveness• a desire for feedback• emotional fortitude (taking a stand)• high energy• imaginative• expanding comfort zone• ability to manage conflict• unafraid of the unknown• being proactive and forward looking rather than reactive | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• personality• proactivity versus reactivity• relational competence• ability to responding well to significantly different situations• a sense of humility and humanity• tactful vulnerability• good habitual behaviors• inspirational• ability to manage conflict• conscientiousness |
|---|---|--|

The above behavior repertoire and its differentiation are significantly more complex than what you experienced at the lower organizational levels. Consequently, as with cognitive and social capacities, your behavioral capacity must expand to handle the behavioral complexity inherent at the senior level.

Leadership Approach

As depicted in Figure 1, ***Leadership Approach = Leadership Style + Context + Situation***. To be an effective senior leader, you do not apply just one of these five personal dimensions at a specific time or within a specific context. Rather, to be effective you make the best collective use of all personal dimensions at all times. You as the senior leader—through your leadership approach—facilitate, engage, and apply the knowledge, experience, and capacities embedded within these five sets of personal dimensions. The most perceptive senior leaders alter the ways in which they apply their leadership approach based upon the context, urgency, magnitude of risk, decision-making process, potential 2nd and 3rd order consequences, and immediate versus long-term actions and implications.

Summary of Personal Dimensions. Each of the listed competencies by themselves is not sufficient for strategic leadership success. “Cognitive capacities provide the rationale for organized executive leader action, whereas behavioral or social capacities provide the means of implementing planned actions in complex social domains,”⁴ writes Steve Zaccaro in his book, *The Nature of Executive Leadership*. Consequently, having self-awareness and objective understanding of your personal dimensions, combined with dedicated efforts to expand your personal capacity in each dimension, are major factors for ultimate success as a senior leader.

Disclaimer. Some may view behavioral flexibility, complexity and capacity to be part of social capacity. The framework is conceptual; by separating social and behavioral capacity, it clearly illustrates the importance of both.

End Notes

- ¹ Personal interview and discussions with Linda Washington, President & CEO, The Washington Consulting Team; former Assistant Secretary for Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation.
- ² Personal interview with Vice Admiral Ann Rondeau, President of College of DuPage; former President of National Defense University; former Deputy Commander, US Transportation Command.
- ³ Personal interview with Mark Gerencser, Chair, Board of Visitors University of Maryland University College; Board member, Alion Science & Technology Corp; former Executive Vice President, Booz Allen Hamilton; coauthor of *Megacommunities*.

- 4 Steve Zaccaro, *The Nature of Executive Leadership* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 147.