

# The drive for strong leaders

May 23, 2017  
Global

[David Henderson](#) and [Randall S. Peterson](#)

In times of uncertainty, threat and change, people look for a strong leader to guide them through rough waters, fear and the potential scarcity of resources. David Henderson and Randall S. Peterson examine what it means to be a strong leader.

Being perceived as “strong” is critical to emerging as a leader in these situations as well as to keeping the leadership role once you have it. What does it mean, though, to be perceived as “strong”?

If you ask bosses or employees about strong leadership, they will typically talk at a high level about a leader’s character and competence. Some might even argue that they know a strong leader when they see one, but do we have the ability to train individuals to exhibit the “strength” people want to see?

The short answer is: yes, in many ways we do. The field of organisational behaviour has, for decades, conducted research to determine what it means to be viewed as “strong” enough to ascend to important leadership roles, particularly in times of uncertainty and change. It is not an exact science, but it does give us some clear direction with at least four ways to think about leader strength.

## Look the Part

Some of the earliest studies in this area sought to uncover specific traits that might contribute to being perceived as a “strong” leader. While this research has yet to uncover a ‘strength gene’, it has informed us that being viewed as physically and emotionally robust contributes to being viewed as strong. Height, extraordinary energy levels, appearing busy and active, and being physically attractive are all important signals of fitness to lead. We see political leaders, for

example, supplying the media with a steady stream of publicity photos aimed at showcasing these very traits.

### **Act the Part**

Having a dominant personality is another trait that seems to capture our attention when we are looking for a strong leader. 75 years of research on dominance consistently shows that people who take charge, influence others, are assertive, and believe they have leadership qualities are much more likely to be selected for leadership roles. On the margin, it also helps if you can give the impression of strength by having above average decision making abilities and technical competence. An example is Jack Welch, who, in 1960 graduated from the University of Illinois with a PhD in Chemical Engineering—prior to becoming a famous leader at GE.

### **Be Inclusive**

To maintain the support of followers, leaders need to listen and learn from their followers. The person most likely to be selected as leader, is the one who represents the centre-point of the group, who has a widespread following, and replays back to the group the things they are thinking. Maya Angelou, an American civil rights activist, became an icon of strength because she was embraced as a central voice for females and could express these women's emotions and thoughts in her own words. Strong leaders take control of the process of engaging with their followers, ensuring they hear all of the voices rather than just the ones who shout the loudest.

### **Have Consistent Values**

Finally, organisational behaviour also suggests that we view individuals as strong when they have clear and consistent values, and the moral courage to stick to those values in the face of challenge. Moral courage is not easy, and followers look to see the potential for moral courage early in leaders. For example, being an outspoken supporter of an idea or group that is low status, such as migrant workers or the LGBTQ community, will be viewed as an act of moral courage if the leader seeks to publicly showcase a commitment to inclusiveness.

### **Conclusion and a Warning**

Being perceived as strong leader, ready for opportunity, can be an acquired skill. By cultivating each of these four strategies for strong leadership, you can improve your chances of being selected as leader, and improve your chances of success once you are in the role.

Our advice comes with a warning, however. Each of these strategies can be overplayed and lead people to believe you will become an authoritarian leader rather than a strong leader. Yes, strong leaders tend to be high energy and dominant, but people also want their leaders to be resilient, tactful, kind, caring, and tolerant. For example, more dominance is better for getting the role, but once you have the job, successful leaders also need to listen, learn, and adapt to stay ahead and be seen as a problem-solver in these fast-changing and turbulent times. Be strong, without being authoritarian.

*The views expressed are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of The Economist Intelligence Unit.*