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Do You Have to Be Smart to Be a Leader?

The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.  

Plutarch

I must have a prodigious quantity of mind; it takes me as much as a week sometimes to make it up.  

Mark Twain

In the last few chapters we have described the various elements of leadership. We now turn to three related questions. In this chapter we consider the question of intelligence: do you have to be smart to be a leader, and, if so, in what way? In the chapter 8, we examine the evidence on personality and ask what are the characteristics most associated with effective leadership? In chapter 9 we consider what happens when it all goes wrong: when leaders fail and derail.

It is possible to speculate on these questions but we prefer to consider robust evidence. Accordingly, this chapter and the following two are a little more academic in nature and content. We want to be able to describe substantive studies and meta-analyses that combine the results from a wide range of investigations into a focused and authoritative resource. Such evidence does indeed exist. In 2004, Timothy Judge and colleagues conducted
a meta-analysis to aggregate 151 independent samples from 96 sources to examine the relationship between intelligence and leadership. They found that the correlation between intelligence and leadership was either 0.21 or 0.27 depending on whether various statistical corrections were made in the analysis. They also state that ‘perceptual measures of intelligence’ (whether people are perceived to be intelligent—i.e., estimates) showed stronger correlations with leadership than paper and pencil (real) measures. Nevertheless, they concluded that the correlations between intelligence and leadership were considerably lower than originally thought, though the correlation was significant and in the expected direction. As intelligence rises, so does effective leadership but the association—though not random—is weak. It may also be that enough (intelligence) is enough.

If the Judge meta-analysis is correct, then only between 4% and 7.5% of leadership effectiveness is accounted for by differences in intelligence between leaders. The reasons for this relatively low correlation cannot be determined with any certainty from the study, but it is important to take on board the small size of the impact of intelligence on leadership. It may be because leadership effectiveness is less to do with solving complex problems and more about bringing the best out of people. Leadership is a contact sport and thus more dependent on social skills than purely cognitive acumen.

The impact of general intelligence on leadership effectiveness may be poorly researched, however, if there are several different types of intelligence to consider. Naturally, there are many definitions of intelligence. The simplest is that intelligence is what intelligence tests measure, though this is circular. More commonly, psychologists describe the difference between specific intelligences and their proposed common root (‘g’ or general intelligence) which is said to account for the correlations between intelligence measures of all kinds whether verbal, numerical, spatial and so on. If such specific intelligences do indeed exist, then the research aimed at establishing the relationship between intelligence and leadership would need to consider several different possible forms of intelligence and their varying impacts. In addition, we would need to consider in this book that there may be different forms of intelligence better suited to strategic leadership, operational leadership and interpersonal leadership.