

The Impact of Top Leaders' Personalities: The Processes Through Which Organizations Become Reflections of Their Leaders

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Abstract

The fascination with leaders and their impacts can be traced to ancient times and continues to this day. Organizations are often viewed as reflections of their leaders' personalities, yet empirical evidence for this assumption has begun to amass only recently. In this article, we review this literature and trace findings about leaders' personality traits, values, and motives and about the mechanisms through which these are manifested in their organizations. We specifically elaborate on research linking senior leaders' values to organizational outcomes (e.g., financial performance, schoolchildren's values) and demonstrate the mediating role of the organizational culture and climate.

Keywords

leader personality, leader values, CEOs, upper echelons, school leadership

The fascination with leaders and their impacts can be traced to ancient times. Consider, for example, the attention that leaders such as King David, Alexander the Great, and Attila the Hun, as well as Steve Jobs and Martin Luther King, Jr., have attracted. As prominent 19th-century historian Thomas Carlyle noted, "the history of what man has accomplished in this world [is] the history of . . . Great Men" (1841, p. 3). The interest in such leaders has been focused on identifying their attributes and linking them to the outcomes of their leadership. Accordingly, since as early as the topic of leadership has been studied, efforts have been made to characterize the personality of "great leaders."

Despite this interest, however, and despite an abundance of studies on leaders' personalities (e.g., Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Stogdill, 1948), only over the past decade have researchers begun to directly study such "great leaders," or in other words, senior leaders of large collectives (e.g., nations, organizations), by more systematically addressing the effects of top leaders' personalities (e.g., Berson & Oreg, 2016; Berson, Oreg, & Dvir, 2008; Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; Oreg & Berson, 2011; Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller,

2009). In this review, we discuss the evidence that has accumulated in this field, highlighting both conceptual insights and empirical findings about (a) the impact that top leaders' personalities have on organizational and stakeholder outcomes and (b) the mechanisms through which this impact comes about.

Organizational Reflections of Leaders' Personalities

By *personality*, we refer to the personal attributes of the individual, which once formed are relatively stable over time and across situations (Pervin, 1990). These attributes are typically formed early in life (although there is some debate as to how early, and change in personality has been documented later in life as well). Theory and research demonstrate how personality can be captured

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through a range of concepts, including traits, values, motives, and interests (McAdams & Olson, 2010). The various concepts are both conceptually and empirically related, and the overarching mechanisms through which they are linked with organizational outcomes are accordingly shared. At the same time, the different concepts (e.g., traits, values) are distinct, and each set highlights a unique aspect of individuals' personalities. We begin by outlining the main routes explaining the effects of leaders' personalities on their organizations and then review findings for the specific personality concepts studied.

To date, two main routes have been proposed for explaining how organizational outcomes become related to top leaders' personalities. According to the literature on upper echelons (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984), senior leaders of organizations make decisions on the basis of their personal interpretations of the organization and its environment. These decisions, in turn, shape the organization and influence its performance. Given that leaders' personal interpretations derive from their personality (e.g., traits, values), organizations thus come to reflect the leader. Some support for the central tenets of the upper echelons model comes from evidence for relationships between leaders' demographics, which are used as proxies for leaders' values, and financial outcomes of their organizations (for a review, see Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004). Demographics have been used as proxies because of the relative ease with which data about them can be collected, but they are only distally related to the psychological qualities they aim to represent, and their correspondence with these psychological qualities is often questionable. Only recently has research begun to more explicitly and directly test the relationship between senior leaders' personalities and organizational outcomes.

A second route through which collectives come to reflect their leaders involves the process through which members of the organization are employed in the organization. This process has been addressed in what is known as the attraction-selection-attrition perspective (Schneider, 1987; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). According to this perspective, leaders' personalities attract or deter job applicants, influence decisions to select or reject them, and influence turnover decisions of current members of the organization. Through such processes of attraction, selection, and attrition, organizations become more homogeneous in the personality attributes of their members, with members ending up similar to the organization's leader.

In the following sections, we begin by reviewing the evidence for relationships between top leaders' personalities and organizational outcomes. To organize this evidence, we discuss the findings for leader traits and

leader values separately and mention some additional dispositional factors beyond these two categories. We then follow with a description of the growing evidence for the process through which these relationships form.

Evidence for Effects of Top Leaders' Personality

Top leaders' traits and organizational outcomes

Most of the attention in personality research has been given to traits, which embody the overall manner in which the individual typically behaves. Key trait frameworks include the five-factor model of personality (aka the *Big Five*; Digman, 1990), alongside other approaches that focus on more specific traits, such as core self-evaluations (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997) and narcissism (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Within the body of research on traits, attention has been given both to traits that are generally considered positive (e.g., emotional stability) and to those that are generally considered negative (e.g., narcissism). In several studies, CEOs' big-five traits (e.g., emotional stability) were linked with firm financial outcomes (Colbert, Barrick, & Bradley, 2014; Herrmann & Nadkarni, 2014; Nadkarni & Herrmann, 2010; Wang, Holmes, Oh, & Zhu, 2016). Consistently across these studies, CEOs' emotional stability and openness to experience (e.g., originality, creativity) were associated with improved organizational performance. CEO conscientiousness, however, which involves dependability and achievement orientation, has yielded both positive (Colbert et al., 2014) and negative (Herrmann & Nadkarni, 2014; Nadkarni & Herrmann, 2010) effects on performance. Whereas conscientiousness may promote organizational goal attainment, it may hinder strategic flexibility, which is also important for organizations' performance (Nadkarni & Herrmann, 2010).

Other CEO traits that have been linked with organizational outcomes include core self-evaluations (Resick et al., 2009; Simsek, Heavey, & Veiga, 2010), which capture the manner in which individuals evaluate their own ability and worth, and dispositional time orientation (Chen & Nadkarni, 2017), which captures individuals' typical pace and sense of urgency. Overall, positive self-evaluations and a dispositional sense of urgency tend to be positively linked with organizational performance.

Like positive characteristics, negative attributes (sometimes referred to as "dark" personality traits), and in particular narcissism, also play an important role in the decisions of senior leaders and the organizational consequences that result from them (Resick et al., 2009). Grandiose narcissism, which is stereotypically

characteristic of executives, involves feelings of entitlement and superiority as well as a need for attention, recognition, and admiration (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; Zhang, Ou, Tsui, & Wang, 2017). One disadvantage of narcissistic leaders is their need for constant attention and social praise, which distracts them from focusing on performance cues and leads them to adopt suboptimal business strategies that attract media attention (Petrenko, Aime, Ridge, & Hill, 2016; Zhu & Chen, 2015). Yet unlike clinical forms of narcissism for which evidence suggests mainly negative implications, grandiose narcissism has been shown to also have positive outcomes (Engelen, Neumann, & Schmidt, 2016). Narcissistic CEOs seek to “change the world” and engage in radical attempts to foster innovation and fight inertia, ultimately leading to extreme performance fluctuations of their organizations (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; Maccoby, 2000). Although these CEOs’ excessive risk taking may sometimes incur big losses to the organizations they lead, these CEOs may also be effective in promoting organizational performance in dynamic environments, such as in the high-tech industry (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; Gerstner, König, Enders, & Hambrick, 2013).

Top leaders’ values and organizational outcomes

Beyond referring to how people typically behave, as captured by traits, personality can also be described by considering those things the individuals deem important in life—as reflected in people’s personal values (Rokeach, 1973). Values reflect individuals’ overarching motivations and are often defined as guiding principles in people’s lives (Schwartz, 1992). One of the key theoretical and empirically based frameworks of personal values distinguishes among four broad categories of values, placed on two axes (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012). On one axis, openness-to-change values reflect an emphasis on values of novelty, stimulation, and autonomy. These contrast with values of conservation, in which the emphasis is on security, tradition, and conformity to societal norms. The second axis involves an emphasis on the welfare of other people and the environment (self-transcendence values) versus values in which the focus is on the self.

Complementing the literature on leader traits, our own research has focused on the impact of top leaders’ values on organizational processes and outcomes (Berson & Oreg, 2016; Berson et al., 2008; Oreg & Berson, 2011). In one study, we found that CEOs’ personal values predicted the organizational culture and performance of these CEOs’ organizations (Berson et al., 2008). In other studies, we extended insights from

upper echelons research by considering outcomes beyond financial performance (Berson & Oreg, 2016; Oreg & Berson, 2011). For example, in a study of schools undergoing an organizational change, subordinates (i.e., teachers) of leaders (i.e., principals) who value openness to new ideas and experiences were less likely to exhibit resistance to the organizational change (Oreg & Berson, 2011). In a recent study, on which we elaborate below, we showed the impact of principals’ values on schoolchildren, who constitute the key stakeholder of the organization (Berson & Oreg, 2016).

Other scholars have linked top leaders’ values with organizational practices, such as compensation and ethical policies. In one study, organizations of politically liberal CEOs were shown to exhibit greater pay equality than those of conservative CEOs (Chin & Semadeni, 2017). In another study, organizations of CEOs who emphasize the welfare of other people, as captured in values such as freedom, equality, and helpfulness, were more likely to employ ethical practices, as in having a formal statement of ethics and diversity training (Hood, 2003).

Top leaders’ dispositions beyond traits and values

Beyond traits and values, other dispositional attributes of top leaders have been linked with organizational attributes and outcomes (for additional information about the distinctions between the various personality concepts, such as traits, values, and motives, see McAdams & Olson, 2010). As in the case of values, several of these dispositions involve individuals’ motivations. For example, a few studies investigated leaders’ tendencies to focus on the attainment of desired outcomes (i.e., promotion focus) as opposed to the avoidance of undesired obstacles (i.e., prevention focus; Gamache, McNamara, Mannor, & Johnson, 2015; Wallace, Little, Hill, & Ridge, 2010). Firms of promotion-focused CEOs in these studies were more likely to undertake business acquisitions (Gamache et al., 2015) and to ultimately perform better (Wallace et al., 2010), whereas firms of prevention-focused CEOs showed the opposite trend.

Other research showed relationships between motivational dispositions, such as leaders’ need for achievement and the structure of the organizations they led (Miller & Dröge, 1986). Specifically, the higher the CEOs’ need for achievement, the more their organizations were characterized by a centralized structure and the use of formal policies and procedures. In yet other studies, researchers focused on individuals’ cognitive styles and showed that the typical complexity with which CEOs interpret their environment (i.e., cognitive complexity) was related to the breadth of firms’ business ties (e.g., Calori, Johnson, & Sarnin, 1994).

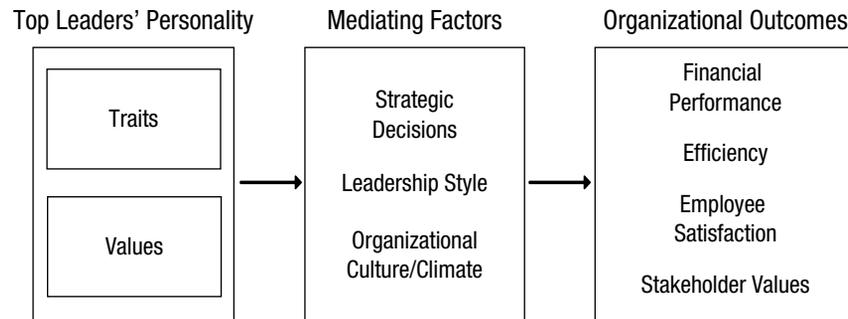


Fig. 1. Diagram of the mediated effects of leader personality on organizational outcomes.

Direct versus indirect means of assessing leaders' personalities

Interestingly, whereas in some of the existing research, leaders' personalities were assessed directly (or explicitly) through measures of self-report (e.g., Berson et al., 2008; Colbert et al., 2014; Herrmann & Nadkarni, 2014), in other studies, researchers resorted to creative, less direct and more implicit means of assessing personality, such as through the analysis of leaders' biographies, mission statements, or features of their photographs (e.g., Gamache et al., 2015; Peterson, Smith, Martorana, & Owens, 2003; Resick et al., 2009). For example, in several studies, CEOs' narcissism was measured through the size of CEO photographs in firms' annual reports (e.g., Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). Whereas these latter assessments have the advantage of being unobtrusive and are not subject to questionnaire-related biases (e.g., social desirability, impression-management tendencies; Uhlmann et al., 2012), they only indirectly tap the psychological content they aim to capture. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages, and findings overall tend to be consistent across studies.

Evidence for the Process Through Which Leaders' Personalities Impact Outcomes

We discussed above some of the conceptual paths through which leaders' personalities may come to influence organizational outcomes and followed with evidence for the effect of leaders' personalities and outcomes. Only a subset of the research in this field, however, has empirically tested the paths proposed for these effects. This subset tested the factors that mediate the effects of leader personality on organizational outcomes (see Fig. 1). Among the studies on CEO traits, a main mediator considered was the strategic decisions that CEOs make (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2011; Herrmann & Nadkarni, 2014; Nadkarni & Herrmann,

2010). CEOs' traits are said to predict CEOs' strategic decisions, which in turn influence the organization's functioning and performance. For example, extraverted CEOs were more likely to initiate strategic change in their organizations than their introverted counterparts (Herrmann & Nadkarni, 2014; for similar conclusions, see Wang et al., 2016), and these strategic decisions are known to shape organizational outcomes. A second mediator tested was the typical behavior or style of leadership employed by the leader (Chen & Nadkarni, 2017; Colbert et al., 2014; Resick et al., 2009). That is, leaders' personalities predict these leaders' style of leadership, which in turn shapes organizational outcomes. For example, in a study of Major League Baseball teams, CEOs' perceptions of their self-worth (i.e., core self-evaluations) were associated with CEOs' inspirational (i.e., transformational) style of leadership, which in turn was related to teams' performance (Resick et al., 2009).

In our own research of top leaders' values, we considered the mediating role of the organizational culture or climate, as assessed through organization members' (e.g., employees') reports (Berson & Oreg, 2016; Berson et al., 2008). In a study of publicly traded firms, we found that CEOs' values were associated with firms' culture, which in turn predicted different aspects of firms' performance (see Fig. 2). Specifically, CEOs who value autonomy and independent thinking (i.e., self-direction) lead organizations with cultures that tend to be innovative and, in turn, achieve financial growth; CEOs who value security manage well-structured and rule-oriented organizations, which tend to function efficiently; and CEOs who value helping other people (i.e., benevolence) manage supportive organizations, in which employees tend to be more satisfied with their jobs. Although these findings are consistent with the notion that leaders' values shape organizational outcomes, they can also be interpreted to suggest that organizations' cultures influence the type of leaders that end up in the organization. There may thus be several



Fig. 2. Schematic showing how CEOs' values are reflected in organizational culture and outcomes. Figure adapted from Berson, Oreg, and Dvir (2008).

paths by which leaders' and organizations' characteristics become aligned.

Beyond its impact on their immediate subordinates, the personality of senior leaders may have a more far-reaching influence on a broader group of stakeholders (e.g., Berson, Da'as, & Waldman, 2015). To demonstrate this extended span of influence, we studied schools and highlighted the key role that school leaders have in shaping the development of children's values (Berson & Oreg, 2016). The path of influence that we proposed runs from principals' values through the school climate and on to children's values. To test our model, we collected data from over 250 school principals and almost 50,000 schoolchildren, who reported their personal values. A year following this initial report, teachers from these schools reported on the school climate, and in the following year, we recollected values data from more than half the children who reported their values 2 years earlier.

The results of our analyses are presented in Figure 3. As can be seen, principals' values had either a direct effect on the development of children's values or an effect that was mediated by the school climate. Over the 2 years of our study, schoolchildren's values became more similar to the values of their principal. For example, schools of principals who value the welfare of other people (i.e., are self-transcendent) were more likely to have a supportive climate, which in turn was associated with increases in children's emphasis on the welfare of others. Similarly, schools of principals who value achievement were more likely to have a performance-oriented climate, which was associated with increases in children's emphasis on achievement. As can be seen in the right column of Figure 3, children's values were also reflected in these children's in-class behaviors.

Beyond the particular context of schools and schoolchildren, this study demonstrates the meaningful impact that senior leaders have on their organizations and at least one of the mechanisms through which this impact is achieved. Moreover, this study demonstrates the long-term effect on stakeholders beyond employees and financial performance.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Corresponding with intuitive understandings about the importance of leaders' nature, there is mounting empirical evidence with respect to the near- and far-reaching implications of leaders' personalities. By focusing on senior leaders, we have been able to test a classic assumption that organizations reflect the personality of their leaders. We are beginning to understand how leaders' behavioral tendencies and value priorities leave their mark on outcomes and stakeholders, both within and outside the organization. Some evidence also exists for the paths through which leaders' personalities come to shape outcomes, such as through styles of leadership and the organizational culture. Yet, overall, much more research in this field needs to be conducted before we can more systematically map the relationships between specific top leaders' personality constructs (e.g., conscientiousness) and specific employee and organizational outcomes (e.g., firm efficiency).

Because much of the research on top leaders' personalities was conducted outside of psychology, most of the paths uncovered for the effects of leaders' personalities focus on strategic, rather than psychological, processes. Future research can more directly consider psychological mechanisms, such as the role of hiring and retaining employees who are similar to the leader (Schneider et al., 1995). Other paths may involve the organizational vision that leaders conjure and communicate. Specifically, leaders' traits and values are likely to have a strong impact on the content of leaders' visions, which in turn influences organizational and stakeholder outcomes. Furthermore, more research is needed on personality concepts beyond traits and values, including additional research on leaders' motivational characteristics, such as needs and chronic regulatory focus (Higgins, 1998), and cognitive attributes, such as the dispositional level of construal (e.g., Berson, Halevy, Shamir, & Erez, 2015; Spassova & Lee, 2013). In addition to exploring the impact of leaders on organizations, another direction for future investigation may be to consider leaders as *reflections* of their organizations. Leaders may be selected by organizations

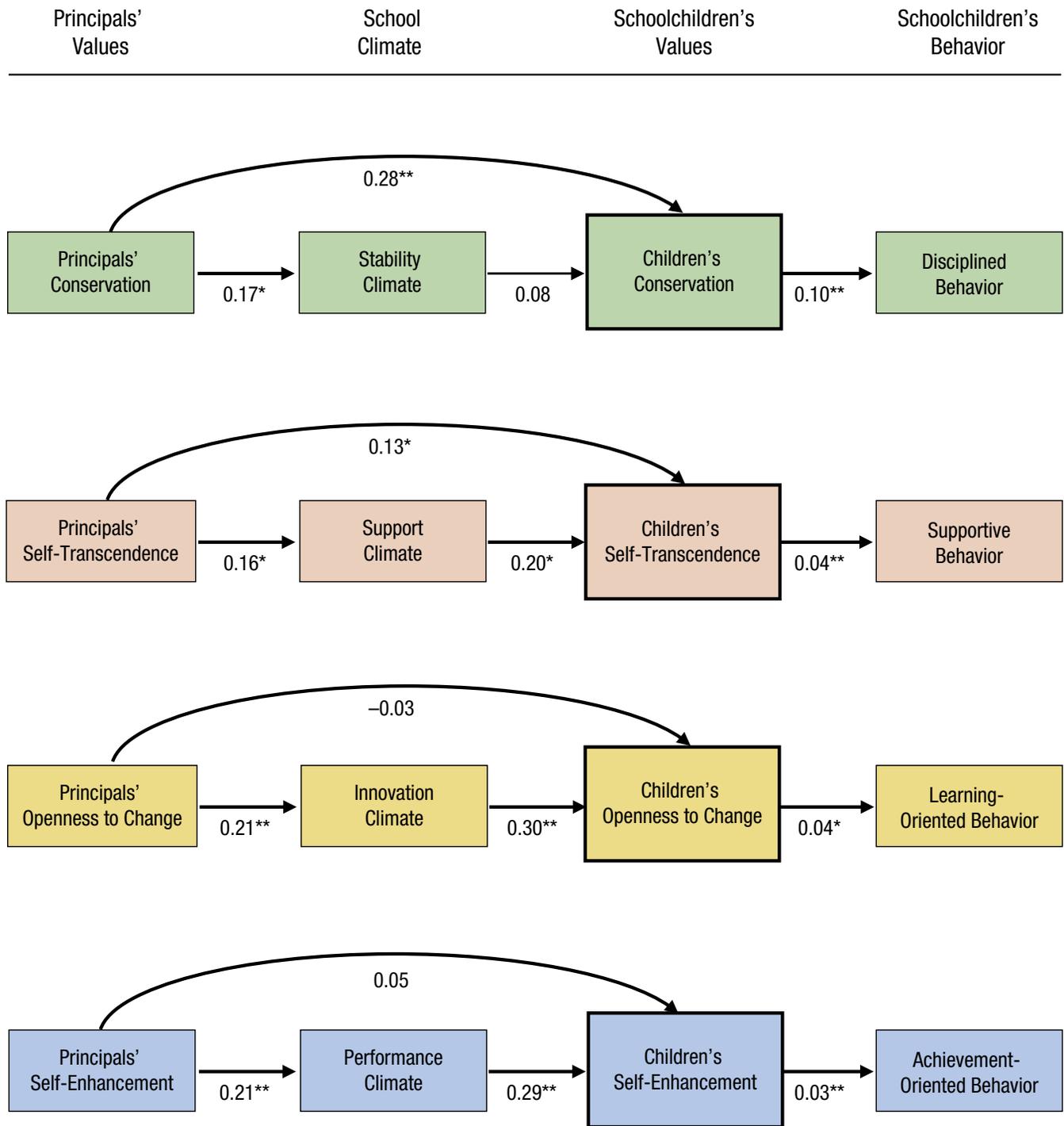


Fig. 3. Model results from Berson and Oreg (2016): the four paths showing the influence of specific principals' values on four related aspects of schoolchildren's behavior, as mediated by school climate and schoolchildren's values. Each part of the model shows the link of a specific value with a specific feature of the school climate and a specific behavioral outcome. The assessed dimensions of school climate involved the school's emphasis on stability, supportiveness, innovation, or performance. The effect sizes shown are standardized estimates. The boldface outlines the key variables in the analysis. Asterisks indicate significant paths (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$). Figure adapted from Berson and Oreg (2016).

on the basis of their fit with the organizational culture.

The insights obtained thus far in this field have implications for the selection of top leaders into organizations, as well as the type of choices that stakeholders

(e.g., constituents, customers) would want to make. For example, when selecting children's schools, parents may wish to consider, among other factors, principals' personal values, as these may be communicated in personal and public meetings.

Recommended Reading

- Berson, Y., & Oreg, S. (2016). (See References). A recent large-scale study of the process through which the values of senior leaders (school principals) shape an important organizational outcome (schoolchildren's values).
- Colbert, A. E., Barrick, M. R., & Bradley, B. H. (2014). (See References). A representative study that illustrates original research about the relationships between senior leaders' traits and organizational performance outcomes.
- Hambrick, D. C. (2007). (See References). An updated review of upper echelons theory, which links executives' personal experiences and values with the strategic decisions they make for their organizations.
- Wang, G., Holmes, R. M., Oh, I. S., & Zhu, W. (2016). (See References). A detailed, quantitative review of the literature linking CEO attributes (including personality traits) with organizational outcomes.

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