The construct behind the leadership ability gifting assessment for 6- to 18-year-olds

Introduction

In 1972, the Commission of Education's Marland Report[1], updating Congress on the state of gifted and talented (GT) education, included "leadership ability" among six domains of talent. Leadership continues to be listed in the US Department of Education, the Javits Act, and more than a dozen US state DOE definitions of gifted and talented. Little impetus has focused on developing this aptitude, as educators focus almost entirely on academic priorities with a few attempts at visual and presentation arts and, of course, our culture's fascination with athletics. All the while, a depleted leadership pipeline regularly ranks near the top of lists of what CEOs worry about most, with succession plans suffering from insufficient leaders on the horizon. This paper explains the construct behind an instrument designed to estimate the likelihood of leadership talent, focusing on leadership emergence, called the Nelson Young Leader Inventory (NYLI). The NYLI is a 30-question assessment that adult raters complete on 6- to 18-year-olds whom they've observed in social settings. The instrument is designed to measure the probability of organizational leadership giftedness, based on four skill sub-sets.

Looking at the Right Qualities

Identifying the right qualities in the selection of leaders is difficult at all ages. Sorcher and Brant, in a Harvard Business Review article, noted how companies often hire and promote people who appear to have leader qualities but who can't really lead. For example, "Superior problem-solving capabilities can mask a deficiency in long-range, conceptual, or strategic thinking. Being able to solve a problem is one thing; knowing which problem to solve—and then taking the initiative to solve it—is quite another."[2] They go on to say that many companies focus their resources on developing leaders rather than on accurately identifying them initially. Cohn and Moran (2011) make the same point in their book, asking the question in the title, "Why Are We Bad at Picking Good Leaders?"[3]

The Marland Report noted, "Many young (GT) people go unnoticed. Very little identification has been carried on in depth, or with proper testing instruments. Many of the assumptions about giftedness and its incidence in various parts of American society are based on inadequate data, partial information,

and group tests of limited value."[4] Although the report was talking about GT students in general, this is certainly the case with current assessments designed to identify leadership ability in students, what I call the "O Factor."

Most leadership research focuses on two areas, emergence and effectiveness. Leadership emergence looks at how individuals step up to organize groups, how people select who they think is a leader, and why they follow. The latter involves implicit leadership, the sort of mental picture people have in terms of what a leader should do, be like, and at times even look like. For example, if you ask a group to do a task without designating someone to be in charge, who emerges as the organizer? While this is related to identifying O Factors, our primary goal is to measure who demonstrates exceptional ability to learn organizational skills at a young age, related to but slightly different from stepping up to lead. When you look at leader emergence, you need to make sure that you're focusing on the qualities that actually cause an individual to organize the group to accomplish a task together, not just who gives the impression of being a leader and/or who others think is a leader. This challenge is not limited to children and youth; it's a common problem among adults, many of whom are sophisticated at hiring and organizational processes.[5,6] Metaphorically speaking, when a farmer walks through a field, he should be able to distinguish between a weed and a corn sprout.

The other research impetus, leadership effectiveness, focuses on what makes organizational leaders good at what they do. Usually, the purpose of these studies is to improve leadings. Dozens of these assessments exist, but practically none identify leadership potential; nearly all were created to help organizational influencers improve their skills. Identification of organizational aptitude at a young age is different from leadership effectiveness as an adult.

Why do we wait so late to train our leaders?

Nearly all of the assessments used to identify leadership ability giftedness in students confuse qualities we seek in leaders with what distinguishes those who lead from non-leaders. For example, most would agree that leaders should be good listeners, because hearing out team members harvests ideas, improves trust, and engenders commitment. But good listening is also a skill that we value in all people, not just those who lead. Therefore, listening does not distinguish what leaders do from non-leaders. Conversely, the ability to convene people to work on a shared goal is something that distinguishes leaders from non-leaders. The former characteristic (listening) is what we may call a Type II quality, something we want our leaders to have, but doesn't specifically distinguish what leaders do uniquely from others. The latter quality (convening) is a Type I characteristic, something that leaders typically possess that differentiates them from others (see Graphic 1).

If you review GT assessments with questions designed to identify leadership gifting, you'll notice that 80-100 percent of the questions are related to Type II qualities. (Table 1 lists examples of each Type.) Questions like these make more sense if you're offering a 360-assessment on a leader to target

areas for improvement. "What-do-you-like-most-in-a-leader?" surveys prompt researchers to look at the qualities people desire in their bosses as opposed to what actually makes leadership happen. Type II characteristics can improve leader efficacy, but they're secondary. Identification of giftedness is different from skill improvement. If you're trying to assess a distinct talent of organizational leadership, then Type II questions don't significantly aid in that process because any number of students not gifted in leadership could do relatively well. When those who specialize in education, not organizational leadership, create assessment questions, you're more likely to get items that lack clarity. (In the same way, leadership experts would not be strong in developing pedagogical surveys.) Distinguishing children and youth with a predisposition to lead is a different objective from helping those with talent in the area to hone it. If you're interested in learning more about genetic research and nature versus nurture behind leadership giftedness, please download the white paper titled "The O Factor" (www.LeadYoungTraining.com/library).

Qualities we seek in strong people

Qualities we seek in leaders

Non-essential Qualities (Type II)

Essential Qualities (Type l)

Graphic 1. Leader Qualities Types: Non-Essential – Essential

Current instruments available to assess leadership gifting possess one or two other weaknesses. Some measure a variety of talents and only focus a few questions on leadership (4-10 items), creating a very shallow look at the gift. Given that 80-100 percent of these are Type II questions, such a small sampling is even less likely to reliably identify leadership aptitude. These instruments may serve as basic pretests to see if more involved testing is warranted, but they should not be used to determine if the O Factor is present. A few of the assessments use self-responses, where students answer questions based on self-perceptions. The weakness of this method is that adolescence is a period when we grapple with self-identify as well as social pressures for acceptance. Accepting feedback from people trying to figure out how others are reacting to their influence is unreliable. Plus, students with little to no formal leadership feedback are apt to find concepts related to organizational leadership challenging to

understand. Even adults wrestle with this in their supervisors. A more reliable method is to use observers who've seen students in social settings, measuring their ability by the quantity and type of environments in which they've seen the student.

NYLI Background

Our work the last decade in developing and implementing the Social Influence Survey (SIS), a 25-multiple choice question assessment completed by an adult on a student, offered a somewhat holistic approach to estimating organizational leadership aptitude. Answers were based on a 1- to 5-Likert scale, customized for each question. A consistent 6th answer option was "Unsure," providing low-level rater confidence qualification. Used by LeadYoung certified curricula trainers, the SIS offered a pragmatic approach in hopes of inviting students with scores over 3.60 into a project-based training program. Currently, we offer this for assessments on 2- to 6-year-olds. The NYLI was an upgrade of the SIS for 6- to 18-year-olds. It increased the number of questions to 30, organized 28 of the questions into 4 typologies (see Table 1), and offered 6 categories of gifting probabilities (see Table 2). This more involved rater survey seeks to measure the quality of responders' answers. NYLI focuses primarily on Type I leader qualities (causal) and avoids Type II (correlational), creating a more robust assessment for identifying organizational leadership gifting.

Type I Leader Qualities (NYLI)	Type II Leader Qualities

• P1. Persuasive: the ability to get others to see things differently and buy into your ideas and vision; a.k.a. social potency
 	
• P2. Propelled: internal *locus of control*, self-efficacy, achievement-oriented inspiring others to persevere
 	
• P3. Planner: strategic thinking, can come up with ideas and assign tasks that others accept, along with abstract thoughts
 	
• P4. Power: exudes boldness, courage and confidence that compel others to notice and follow
	• 21st Century Skills:
	  - Critical thinker / decisive
	  - Collaborative / relational
	  - Creative / curious
	  - Communicates / listens
	• Confident / high self-esteem
	• Humble / open-minded
	• Moral / ethical
	• Positive / hopeful
	• Charismatic / likeable
	• Intelligent / sensible
	• Flexible / adaptable

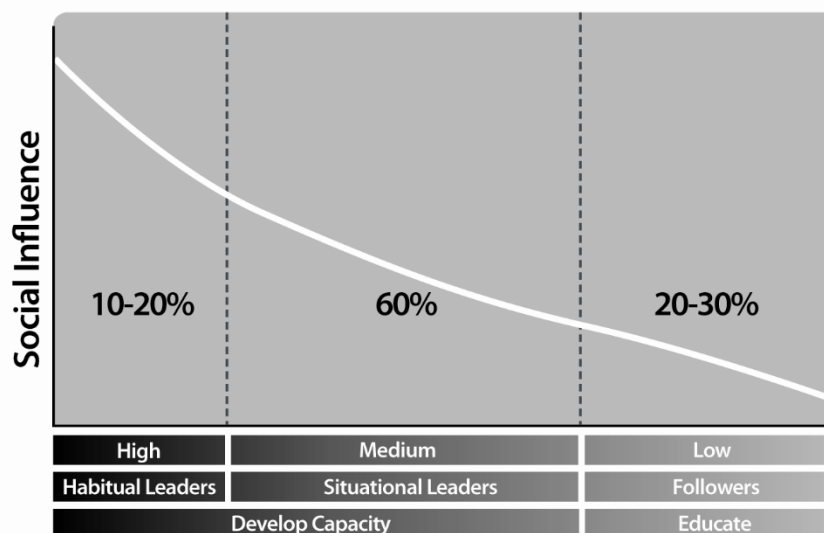Table 1. Examples of Type I (Essential) and Type II (Non-essential) Leader Qualities

By focusing on the essential qualities required for leading, you avoid two common errors: false positives and confusing correlation with cause-and-effect. When too many Type II qualities are used in inventories, you often identify students with charming personalities who are likable and have people skills, but when are asked to organize others, can't. This is common in student governments, where candidates

get voted in by peers based on looks, likeability, charisma and familiarity.[7] Although Type II qualities are frequently observed among effective leaders, they are not essential for leading. Thus, when you ask an associated student body (ASB) council to plan a big event, half of the members develop a glazed stare, akin to the spinning circle on your computer when it's trying to reboot or sync with a software program.

So while we frequently see a number of Type II characteristics evident in effective leaders whom we like and admire, many of these would also be evident in highly functioning, self-actualized individuals who were ineffective at leading. Can these qualities help a leader be more effective? They can, which is why they are often included in 360-improvement instruments, but these items themselves don't cause leadership. They are also evident in people who do not lead. Type II qualities are more about efficacy than emergence, honing a leader's productivity versus identifying who has an aptitude for leading. This is why in adult organizational life we often recruit, promote, and hire individuals who appear to be like leaders we've seen in the past, but who fail miserably because they do not possess the O Factor—the essentials required to catalyze leadership. Just because a person is smart, relational, charismatic, and ethical or has occupied a position of supervision in the past doesn't mean s/he can lead. Many of the characteristics correlate with good leading but don't cause the effect we seek, creating frustration for everyone and making us wonder what went wrong in the selection process. By gathering appropriate feedback from 2-3 raters who've observed a student in social settings, you can identify those with a strong probability of being an O Factor. Initial recommendations could come from people such as teachers, coaches, parents, and child/youth workers.

O Factor Likelihood

General Population Leadership

10-20%	60%	20-30%

High	Medium	Low
Habitual Leaders	Situational Leaders	Followers
Develop Capacity		Educate

Graphic 2. Leader Aptitude Categories

In Graphic 2, 3 categories are illustrated, with results similar to a normal distribution curve. The far left is Habitual Leaders, perhaps half of whom are truly gifted. These students are typically high in social influence and seek situations where they can lead. They get energized by organizing others. Sometimes they try to take over where they shouldn't, but it is a natural, intuitive process for them, even if lacking experience and exhibiting some rough edges. The Marland Report (1972) suggests that most GT students place among the top 3-5 percent, although it also recognizes that this range varies. We suggest accelerated development for the top 10 percent, noting that it's better to think more broadly than narrowly and see how potential O Factors do in more concentrated training situations. Plus, since leadership capacity is often under-developed among the very young, we recommend considering those identified within this category. Training might extend to 10-20 percent for those who come from under-identified populations, such as the poor, certain ethnic cultures that value collectivism and compliance among the young, and extenuating circumstances where a dominant parent or sibling may have stifled O Factor indicators, like domains of giftedness. Habitual leaders need intentional, accelerated training to catalyze and hone their latent potential. That has been our primary focus the last decade.

The middle section (see Graphic 2), Situational Leaders, includes those who can learn to lead in certain contexts. Members in this category are more apt to benefit from training as adults, after they've matured socially-emotionally and gained sufficient life experience that can be translated into organizational management at various levels. Many among this group emerge as middle managers, small business owners, teachers, and project leaders. Organizational leading tends to deplete their energy. The idea that burnout comes from overwork is misleading. Burnout is more often a result of spending too much of our time in areas where we're not gifted or passionate. Laboring within our strengths actually energizes us. I'm not overly concerned about this broad middle section, because while they may emerge in organizational leadership roles later in life, they're not apt to be your top leaders and we've not found that accelerated training benefits them. By placing middle section students into concentrated organizational leadership training, you'll intimidate them and potentially diminish their confidence and self-esteem, not to mention frustrating high-aptitude leaders. Developmental programs can be offered later as adults for this category.

The category on the right side of the graph (see Graph 2) represents students who may be extremely talented and intelligent, but who do not enjoy and would be dealt a grave disservice if singled out to organize others in projects. Being in charge could tear at their self-esteem. This group should be empowered to use their talents and resources in supportive roles. More appropriate organizational goals

involve educating them on leadership as a social process and helping them learn team skills, not focusing on leading.

Sometimes people ask, "But if you train students who seem shy and reticent, won't they become leaders?" After more than a decade of interacting with 100s of trainers and 1000s of students, we haven't seen that happen. As an organizational leadership aptitude predictor, NYLI is based on a combination of teacher surveys, a synthesis of adult leadership assessments, and input from over 200 adults trained in young leader development. Feedback was received from its predecessors' (SIS) application on 1000s of students in various countries and cultures. Again, it's important to note that adults take the assessment on students, since self-awareness is quite unstable until adulthood. Only responders and designated Trainers receive results, to avoid bias that is more likely to occur if the person believes a parent will see his/her answers.

Following is a list of categories suggesting the likelihood of organizational giftedness, based on our assessment and observations of 6- to 18-year-olds the last 10 years. Please note this is not a declarative assessment of future possibilities, but rather a current estimate of leadership aptitude and an ability to benefit from accelerated skill training at an early age. Another way of putting it is that we're predicting the likelihood of students to emerge as leaders as opposed to suggesting which youth are unlikely to become leaders later in life.

Again, these levels (see Table 2) vary slightly depending on age, socio-economic demographics, and cultural influence in regard to adult-child social norms and familial customs, as well as the quality of the rater's observations. Scores are based on a 1- to 5-Likert scale with 1.00 being the lowest and 5.00 the highest.

NYLI Composite Score Categories
• 1.00-2.49 Very low probability of leadership giftedness
• 2.50-3.00 Low probability of leadership giftedness
• 3.01-3.49 Slight probability of leadership giftedness
• 3.50-3.79 Modest probability of leadership giftedness
• 3.80-4.39 High probability of leadership giftedness
• 4.40-5.00 Very high probability of leadership giftedness

Table 2. NYLI Ranges of Leadership Gifting Probability

Multiple Assessments

Experts in the GT field suggest multiple assessment strategies as opposed to relying on a single instrument. While NYLI provides one type of metric, a suite of tools offers a more robust process in identifying O Factor abilities, justifying accelerated development.

- *Current GT assessments:* Other GT instruments claiming to measure leadership ability could be used, even if they focus on Type II characteristics instead of Type I, so long as they were limited to pre-tests. These could include adult responders and self-assessments.

- *Peer ratings*: In addition to adult surveys, you might augment these with peers rating those whom they respect as group organizers, so long as the questions reflect O Factor characteristics. "Who would you want to be put in charge of class if the teacher stepped out?" "Who would you select as a team captain?" "Who have you seen step up as a group leader in the past?" Because the O Factor is a social function, getting input from a variety of others can be a productive way to see who is perceived to be more naturally influential.

- *Teacher/coach/parent recommendations*: Adults who have observed a student in social settings may offer good recommendations, especially if they've been given a basic understanding of what kind of social, organizational behaviors to note. We recommend this as a first step, followed by the SIS/NYLI.

- *Project-based observations*: Because the O Factor is primarily a social skill, students can participate in project-based activities to see how they respond when given the role of team leader and/or where no one person is deemed leader, to see who rises to the occasion. With basic rater training, adults can provide real time observation and share qualitative feedback on what they see. (For more info on these, please contact us through our website: www.LeadYoungTraining.com.)

Open-Mindedness

Even though classroom teachers and educators are the most apt to see O Factor indicators, because of their involvement in student socializing, an adversarial attitude often develops toward O

Factors. The Marland Report noted, "Identification of the gifted is hampered not only by costs of appropriate testing—when these methods are known and adopted—but also by apathy and even hostility among teachers, administrators, guidance counselors and psychologists."[9] It also reported that recognizing any students as gifted and talented seems to be an uphill battle. "Only 3 percent of the experts felt that pupil personnel workers show a positive attitude toward the gifted, while 22 percent of the responses described negative attitudes, other concerns, or apathy and indifference toward the gifted. Studies have shown that pupil personnel workers are indifferent or hostile in their attitudes toward the gifted, supported as well by the general failure to seek and recognize the gifted in the schools."[10] More recent studies do not appear to dispel these numbers.

Ultimately, the onus of responsibility for identifying O Factors will likely come down to forward-thinking educators and engaged parents. Few are as motivated to assist children and youth than parents. The influence of an informed parent can go a long way in the life of a child as well as within a school and educational system.

Defining Leadership

Any significant discussion on the gift of leadership ability requires a working definition of the concept. Based on a review of the 700 leadership books in my library, less than 5% define the term *leadership*, as if we all automatically know and/or agree on a single explanation. Buyer beware, because leadership has become a popular adjective for selling books, seminars, degrees, and other products. Any linguist will tell you that semantics are important and complex. For example, I can say I *love* my wife, pizza, God, tennis, my dog and sons, but in each context, love means something different. Likewise, the term leadership spans many shades.

If you explore the world of leadership for the young (ages 10-18), you'll notice a lack of depth and consistency. For the most part, leadership is defined as any number of things quite different from how adult specialists convey the concept, focusing rather on citizenship, responsibility, self-esteem, character, and service. Granted, these are wonderful qualities, but they don't distinguish what leaders do in contrast to non-leaders. The cultural popularity of being called a leader combined with a lack of specialization in the area of young leadership have resulted in a concept reflecting self-actualization and appropriate social behavior, not executive skills. One popular student organization with which I am familiar conducts dozens of one-day "student leadership" training events annually. But after observing one of these through the perspective of organizational leadership, I saw very little executive skill training. It was more about team building (vs. leader building), motivation, and fun. Yet participating educators and students believed they were learning how to lead. This illustrates a confusion about what leading is about.

A more effective strategy is to define leadership specifically in terms of what leaders do and how they behave uniquely to others, regardless of age. We define leadership as *the process of helping people accomplish together what they would not or could not as individuals. Leaders are the individuals who catalyze this social process. Leading is how they do it.* This definition provides a stake in the ground to benchmark behaviors, attitudes, and processes that focus on the unique and distinctive qualities of leading. It also reflects more of an executive definition, used by those who study organizational behavior. We refer to this ability as the O Factor, because it reflects the ability to organize people to achieve a common goal. I also prefer the term because the word leadership carries significant cultural baggage. Again, we are so concerned about our children being or not being leaders that we are unwilling to recognize that some might actually be more highly gifted in this area, as is often the case in other talent domains, given the United States' philosophy of egalitarianism.

Identifying the Gift

Are gifted leaders born or built? The answer is "yes." As with the other domains of giftedness, we can't specify what amounts of nature and nurture exist. A growing amount of research in the field of genetics indicates that a certain percentage of leadership aptitude is hereditary.[11]

Yet what we've learned in other areas of GT education would also be applicable in the domain of leadership. Assessments should consider environmental elements and factor in socioeconomic groups and cultural issues that hinder adequate identification. For example, we've learned that in lower socioeconomic areas, such as Hispanic California field workers, leadership development is not valued in that many parents don't believe their children can become bosses. We've also learned that in Southeast Asian culture families, an emphasis on child compliance can mask leadership indicators we commonly see in Westernized youth. Although we believe students gifted in leadership ability exist in all demographic categories and cultures, how we go about identifying them is important.

When considering a diagnostic instrument to identify leadership ability, three strategic questions should be asked:
1. What is the depth of analysis?
2. Does it use self-reporting or rater responses?
3. Does it distinguish what is unique to leading?

First, depth of analysis pertains to how far an assessment goes to distinguish leadership gifts. In multi-gift inventories that include leadership, most offer only 5-10 questions. Even though most GT experts recommend using assessments as only a part of the identification process, relying on a small subset of an assessment reflects a limited strategy, although they could serve as pre-qualifying tests to see if further analysis is warranted. Even though a single instrument can't sample all possible behaviors across various contexts, a more robust assessment consisting of 25-50 questions is realistic. The goal is to provide a substantial list without fatiguing responders.

Second, a leadership ability instrument should use qualified rater responses versus self-reporting. There are three primary reasons for this. A sizable amount of leadership research notes a difference between a leader's self-perceptions and others' views of the leader. Granted, most of these have to do with a leader's effectiveness, but the fact that leaders tend to see themselves differently than others offers sufficient concern for self-diagnosis. Another reason for avoiding self-assessments in this context is that preteens and adolescents are in a precarious developmental stage when self-identity and self-consciousness influence questions based on one's relationships with others. A third issue relates to how viable it is for preteen or teens, who've rarely experienced formal leadership roles with feedback, to rate themselves on a social construct that frequently confuses adults.

Given that leadership is a social construct whereby others follow a few toward common goals, it is unnecessary to ask a preteen's or teen's self-perceptions when you can observe the social behaviors of the subject in task-oriented activities. If others follow the student and effectively work together as a result

of his or her influence, chances are you have a leader. If they don't, you do not. As someone said, "He who thinks he is leading, when no one is following, is simply taking a walk." This is the power behind 360-degree assessing. Although self-responses could round out a suite of assessment tools, significant weight should not be placed on them especially given society's value on being called a leader.

Third, and most importantly, an instrument that reveals leadership gifting should focus on what is unique to leading. As I mentioned, most inventories confuse qualities we seek in leaders with what distinguishes those who lead from non-leaders.

Conclusion

The NYLI is the most robust assessment ever designed to estimate leadership gifting among the very young. The goal is to continue to test and improve it so that society can benefit by identifying leaders early and training them. By getting to them while they're moldable, not moldy, the hope is to raise more effective (competent) and ethical (character) leaders. We believe this is a game-changer and paradigm shift in terms of how society grows leaders and the impact they will make on the future and thereby history.

We can SO lead!

Endnotes:

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