

## What are Traits, Skills, Styles and Intelligences? What is Personality?

Before we explore the underlying theories in this area further, it is worth reflecting on their differences first. This can be done quite easily by looking at their dictionary (*Oxford English Dictionary*) definitions:

*Trait* – a distinguishing feature in character, appearance, habit or portrayal.

*Personality* – a distinctive character or qualities of a person, personal existence or identity, being a person.

*Skill* – expertness, a practised ability, facility in an action.

*Style* – a kind or sort, a manner of writing, speaking or doing, a distinctive manner of a person.

*Intelligence* – understanding, a quickness of understanding.

Keep these definitions in mind as progression is made through the chapter to help you distinguish one approach from the other. While these elements are largely derived from psychological research (please see general psychology texts for further information, such as Gross, 2010) they also reflect some of the areas considered in later chapters of this book, such as facility in an action, which suggests notions of context and leadership (discussed in Chapter 5). Also there is reference to identity and being a person (explored further in Chapter 14) and the idea of traits or characteristics as a portrayal has resonances of the aesthetic or artist representation of the leader and leadership (explored in Chapter 15). So while we might recognize these theories of leadership as traditional they also have links to the areas of leadership studies we will investigate later in the book.

## Traits, Characteristics, Personality and Leadership

Traditionally we think of leadership studies starting with the ideal of the ‘great man’ theories (Carlyle, 1866), in which the idea of a leader was seen through the lens of what it takes to achieve a position of responsibility in society. Whether it be a military officer or upstanding gentleman, the view was that a person was born into a leader role in society. From this view research developed along the lines of identifying characteristics of these born leaders and hence the trait theory approach was developed (Stogdill, 1948). From the late 1940s until the 1990s trait research was ongoing and found a number of characteristics that appear to be linked to leadership. Table 2.1 shows some of the key pieces of research over this time and the traits they identified.

**Table 2.1 Key Trait Research Studies and Findings**

Stogdill (1948)	Mann (1959)	Stogdill (1974)	Lord et al. (1984)	Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991)
Intelligence	Intelligence	Achievement	Intelligence	Drive
Alertness	Masculinity	Persistence	Masculinity	Motivation
Insight	Adjustment	Insight	Dominance	Integrity
Responsibility	Dominance	Self-confidence		Confidence
Initiative	Extroversion	Responsibility		Cognitive ability
Persistence	Conservatism	Cooperativeness		Task knowledge
Self-confidence		Tolerance		
Sociability		Influence		
		Sociability		

Source: Northouse, P.G. (2007) *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage p. 18.

From this summary, Northouse (2007) goes on to conclude that the following are major leadership traits:

- intelligence (Zaccaro et al., 2004) (a further exploration of intelligence and leadership is developed later in this chapter);
- self-confidence;
- determination;
- integrity;
- sociability.

These traits appear to relate to the research on linking leadership to personality and particularly to research that finds a strong link between the big five personality factors (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness) (Judge et al., 2002). Despite these findings and over a century of research on trait theory that provides us with benchmarks when looking for or at leaders (Northouse, 2007), the trait approach does not account for situational variances (which we will explore in Chapter 3). Nor does it actually provide us with a definitive list of which traits make leaders and there is no consideration of the relationship with leadership outcomes (Northouse, 2007). A wider view, where the behaviours of a leader are developed, is put forward by the styles approach, which is discussed in the next section.

### Reflective Question 2.1

Think of a leader from your past experience. Which traits, characteristics and personality factors did they exhibit?