

---

*Leaders are made, not born,  
and how they develop is  
critical for organizational  
change.*

## Seven Transformations of Leadership

by David Rooke and William R. Torbert

*Leaders are made, not born, and how they develop is critical for organizational change.*

---

# Seven Transformations of Leadership

by David Rooke and William R. Torbert

Most developmental psychologists agree that what differentiates leaders is not so much their philosophy of leadership, their personality, or their style of management. Rather, it's their internal "action logic"—how they interpret their surroundings and react when their power or safety is challenged. Relatively few leaders, however, try to understand their own action logic, and fewer still have explored the possibility of changing it.

They should, because we've found that leaders who do undertake a voyage of personal understanding and development can transform not only their own capabilities but also those of their companies. In our close collaboration with psychologist Susanne Cook-Greuter—and our 25 years of extensive survey-based consulting at companies such as Deutsche Bank, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, Hewlett-Packard, NSA, Trillium Asset Management, Aviva, and Volvo—we've worked with thousands of executives as they've tried to develop their leadership skills. The good news is that leaders who make an effort to un-

derstand their own action logic can improve their ability to lead. But to do that, it's important first to understand what kind of leader you already are.

## **The Seven Action Logics**

Our research is based on a sentence-completion survey tool called the Leadership Development Profile. Using this tool, participants are asked to complete 36 sentences that begin with phrases such as "A good leader..." to which responses vary widely:

"...cracks the whip."

"...realizes that it's important to achieve good performance from subordinates."

"...juggles competing forces and takes responsibility for her decisions."

By asking participants to complete sentences of this type, it's possible for highly trained evaluators to paint a picture of how participants interpret their own actions and the world around them; these "pictures" show which one of seven developmental action logics—Opportunist, Diplomat, Expert, Achiever,

Individualist, Strategist, or Alchemist—currently functions as a leader's dominant way of thinking. Leaders can move through these categories as their abilities grow, so taking the Leadership Development Profile again several years later can reveal whether a leader's action logic has evolved.

Over the past 25 years, we and other researchers have administered the sentence-completion survey to thousands of managers and professionals, most between the ages of 25 and 55, at hundreds of American and European companies (as well as nonprofits and governmental agencies) in diverse industries. What we found is that the levels of corporate and individual performance vary according to action logic. Notably, we found that the three types of leaders associated with below-average corporate performance (Opportunists, Diplomats, and Experts) accounted for 55% of our sample. They were significantly less effective at implementing organizational strategies than the 30% of the sample who measured as Achievers. Moreover, only the final 15% of managers in the sample (Individualists, Strategists, and Alchemists) showed the consistent capacity to innovate and to successfully transform their organizations.

To understand how leaders fall into such distinct categories and corporate performance, let's look in more detail at each leadership style in turn, starting with the least productive (and least complex).

### The Opportunist

Our most comforting finding was that only 5% of the leaders in our sample were characterized by mistrust, egocentrism, and manipulativeness. We call these leaders Opportunists, a title that reflects their tendency to focus on personal wins and see the world and other people as opportunities to be exploited. Their approach to the outside world is largely determined by their perception of control—in other words, how they will react to an event depends primarily on whether or not they think they can direct the outcome. They treat other people as objects or as competitors who are also out for themselves.

Opportunists tend to regard their bad behavior as legitimate in the cut and thrust of an eye-for-an-eye world. They reject feedback, externalize blame, and retaliate harshly. One can see this action logic in the early work of Larry

Ellison (now CEO of Oracle). Ellison describes his managerial style at the start of his career as “management by ridicule.” “You’ve got to be good at intellectual intimidation and rhetorical bullying,” he once told Matthew Symonds of the *Economist*. “I’d excuse my behavior by telling myself I was just having ‘an open and honest debate.’ The fact is, I just didn’t know any better.”

Few Opportunists remain managers for long, unless they transform to more effective action logics (as Ellison has done). Their constant fire-fighting, their style of self-aggrandizement, and their frequent rule breaking is the antithesis of the kind of leader people want to work with for the long term. If you have worked for an Opportunist, you will almost certainly remember it as a difficult time. By the same token, corporate environments that breed opportunism seldom endure, although Opportunists often survive longer than they should because they provide an exciting environment in which younger executives, especially, can take risks. As one ex-Enron senior staffer said, “Before the fall, those were such exciting years. We felt we could do anything, pull off everything, write our own rules. The pace was wild, and we all just rode it.” Of course, Enron’s shareholders and pensioners would reasonably feel that they were paying too heavily for that staffer’s adventure.

### The Diplomat

The Diplomat makes sense of the world around him in a more benign way than the Opportunist does, but this action logic can also have extremely negative repercussions if the leader is a senior manager. Loyal serving the group, the Diplomat seeks to please higher-status colleagues while avoiding conflict. This action logic is focused on gaining control of one’s own behavior—more than on gaining control of external events or other people. According to the Diplomat’s action logic, a leader gains more enduring acceptance and influence by cooperating with group norms and by performing his daily roles well.

In a support role or a team context, this type of executive has much to offer. Diplomats provide social glue to their colleagues and ensure that attention is paid to the needs of others, which is probably why the great majority of Diplomats work at the most junior rungs of management, in jobs such as

---

**David Rooke** ([david@harthill.co.uk](mailto:david@harthill.co.uk))

is a partner at Harthill Consulting in Hewelsfield, England. **William R.**

**Torbert** ([torbert@bc.edu](mailto:torbert@bc.edu)) is a professor at Boston College’s Carroll School of Management in Massachusetts. They are coauthors of *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership* (Berrett-Koehler, 2004).

frontline supervisor, customer service representative, or nurse practitioner. Indeed, research into 497 managers in different industries showed that 80% of all Diplomats were at junior levels. By contrast, 80% of all Strategists were at senior levels, suggesting that

managers who grow into more effective action logics—like that of the Strategist—have a greater chance of being promoted.

Diplomats are much more problematic in top leadership roles because they try to ignore conflict. They tend to be overly polite and

## Seven Ways of Leading

Different leaders exhibit different kinds of action logic—ways in which they interpret their surroundings and react when their power or safety is challenged. In our research of thousands of leaders, we observed seven types of action logics. The

least effective for organizational leadership are the Opportunist and Diplomat; the most effective, the Strategist and Alchemist. Knowing your own action logic can be the first step toward developing a more effective leadership style. If you rec-

ognize yourself as an Individualist, for example, you can work, through both formal and informal measures, to develop the strengths and characteristics of a Strategist.

Action Logic	Characteristics	Strengths	% of research sample profiling at this action logic
Opportunist	<i>Wins any way possible.</i> Self-oriented; manipulative; “might makes right.”	Good in emergencies and in sales opportunities.	<b>5%</b>
Diplomat	<i>Avoids overt conflict.</i> Wants to belong; obeys group norms; rarely rocks the boat.	Good as supportive glue within an office; helps bring people together.	<b>12%</b>
Expert	<i>Rules by logic and expertise.</i> Seeks rational efficiency.	Good as an individual contributor.	<b>38%</b>
Achiever	<i>Meets strategic goals.</i> Effectively achieves goals through teams; juggles managerial duties and market demands.	Well suited to managerial roles; action and goal oriented.	<b>30%</b>
Individualist	<i>Interweaves competing personal and company action logics.</i> Creates unique structures to resolve gaps between strategy and performance.	Effective in venture and consulting roles.	<b>10%</b>
Strategist	<i>Generates organizational and personal transformations.</i> Exercises the power of mutual inquiry, vigilance, and vulnerability for both the short and long term.	Effective as a transformational leader.	<b>4%</b>
Alchemist	<i>Generates social transformations.</i> Integrates material, spiritual, and societal transformation.	Good at leading society-wide transformations.	<b>1%</b>

Copyright © 2005 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved.

*Initiating change, with its inevitable conflicts, represents a grave threat to the Diplomat, and he will avoid it if at all possible, even to the point of self-destruction.*

friendly and find it virtually impossible to give challenging feedback to others. Initiating change, with its inevitable conflicts, represents a grave threat to the Diplomat, and he will avoid it if at all possible, even to the point of self-destruction.

Consider one Diplomat who became the interim CEO of an organization when his predecessor died suddenly from an aneurysm. When the board split on the selection of a permanent successor, it asked the Diplomat to carry on. Our Diplomat relished his role as a ceremonial figurehead and was a sought-after speaker at public events. Unfortunately, he found the more conflictual requirements of the job less to his liking. He failed, for instance, to replace a number of senior managers who had serious ongoing performance issues and were resisting the change program his predecessor had initiated. Because the changes were controversial, the Diplomat avoided meetings, even planning business trips for the times when the senior team would meet. The team members were so frustrated by the Diplomat's attitude that they eventually resigned en masse. He "resolved" this crisis by thanking the team publicly for its contribution and appointing new team members. Eventually, in the face of mounting losses arising from this poor management, the board decided to demote the Diplomat to his former role as vice president.

### **The Expert**

The largest category of leader is that of Experts, who account for 38% of all professionals in our sample. In contrast to Opportunists, who focus on trying to control the world around them, and Diplomats, who concentrate on controlling their own behavior, Experts try to exercise control by perfecting their knowledge, both in their professional and personal lives. Exercising watertight thinking is extremely important to Experts. Not surprisingly, many accountants, investment analysts, marketing researchers, software engineers, and consultants operate from the Expert action logic. Secure in their expertise, they present hard data and logic in their efforts to gain consensus and buy-in for their proposals.

Experts are great individual contributors because of their pursuit of continuous improvement, efficiency, and perfection. But as managers, they can be problematic because they are so completely sure they are right. When subor-

dinates talk about a my-way-or-the-highway type of boss, they are probably talking about someone operating from an Expert action logic. Experts tend to view collaboration as a waste of time ("Not all meetings are a waste of time—some are canceled!"), and they will frequently treat the opinion of people less expert than themselves with contempt. Emotional intelligence is neither desired nor appreciated. As Sun Microsystems' CEO Scott McNealy put it: "I don't do feelings; I'll leave that to Barry Manilow."

It comes as no surprise, then, that after unsuccessfully pleading with him to scale back in the face of growing losses during the dot-com debacle of 2001 and 2002, nearly a dozen members of McNealy's senior management team left.

### **The Achiever**

For those who hope someday to work for a manager who both challenges and supports them and creates a positive team and interdepartmental atmosphere, the good news is that a large proportion, 30%, of the managers in our research measured as Achievers. While these leaders create a positive work environment and focus their efforts on deliverables, the downside is that their style often inhibits thinking outside the box.

Achievers have a more complex and integrated understanding of the world than do managers who display the three previous action logics we've described. They're open to feedback and realize that many of the ambiguities and conflicts of everyday life are due to differences in interpretation and ways of relating. They know that creatively transforming or resolving clashes requires sensitivity to relationships and the ability to influence others in positive ways. Achievers can also reliably lead a team to implement new strategies over a one- to three-year period, balancing immediate and long-term objectives. One study of ophthalmologists in private practice showed that those who scored as Achievers had lower staff turnover, delegated more responsibility, and had practices that earned at least twice the gross annual revenues of those run by Experts.

Achievers often find themselves clashing with Experts. The Expert subordinate, in particular, finds the Achiever leader hard to take because he cannot deny the reality of the Achiever's success even though he feels supe-

rior. Consider Hewlett-Packard, where the research engineers tend to score as Experts and the lab managers as higher-level Achievers. At one project meeting, a lab manager—a decided Achiever—slammed her coffee cup on the table and exclaimed, “I *know* we can get 18 features into this, but the customers want delivery some time this century, and the main eight features will do.” “Philistine!” snorted one engineer, an Expert. But this kind of conflict isn’t always destructive. In fact, it provides much of the fuel that has ignited—and sustained—the competitiveness of many of the country’s most successful corporations.

### The Individualist

The Individualist action logic recognizes that neither it nor any of the other action logics are “natural”; all are constructions of oneself and the world. This seemingly abstract idea enables the 10% of Individualist leaders to contribute unique practical value to their organizations; they put personalities and ways of relating into perspective and communicate well with people who have other action logics.

What sets Individualists apart from Achievers is their awareness of a possible conflict between their principles and their actions, or between the organization’s values and its implementation of those values. This conflict becomes the source of tension, creativity, and a growing desire for further development.

Individualists also tend to ignore rules they regard as irrelevant, which often makes them a source of irritation to both colleagues and bosses. “So, what do you think?” one of our clients asked us as he was debating whether to let go of one of his star performers, a woman who had been measured as an Individualist. Sharon (not her real name) had been asked to set up an offshore shared service function in the Czech Republic in order to provide IT support to two separate and internally competitive divisions operating there. She formed a highly cohesive team within budget and so far ahead of schedule that she quipped that she was “delivering services before Group Business Risk had delivered its report saying it can’t be done.”

The trouble was that Sharon had a reputation within the wider organization as a wild card. Although she showed great political savvy when it came to her individual projects, she put many people’s noses out of joint in the

larger organization because of her unique, unconventional ways of operating. Eventually, the CEO was called in (not for the first time) to resolve a problem created by her failure to acknowledge key organizational processes and people who weren’t on her team.

Many of the dynamics created by different action logics are illustrated by this story and its outcome. The CEO, whose own action logic was that of an Achiever, did not see how he could challenge Sharon to develop and move beyond creating such problems. Although ambivalent about her, he decided to retain her because she was delivering and because the organization had recently lost several capable, if unconventional, managers.

So Sharon stayed, but only for a while. Eventually, she left the company to set up an offshoring consultancy. When we examine in the second half of this article how to help executives transform their leadership action logics, we’ll return to this story to see how both Sharon and the CEO might have succeeded in transforming theirs.

### The Strategist

Strategists account for just 4% of leaders. What sets them apart from Individualists is their focus on organizational constraints and perceptions, which they treat as discussable and transformable. Whereas the Individualist masters communication with colleagues who have different action logics, the Strategist masters the second-order organizational impact of actions and agreements. The Strategist is also adept at creating shared visions across different action logics—visions that encourage both personal and organizational transformations. According to the Strategist’s action logic, organizational and social change is an iterative developmental process that requires awareness and close leadership attention.

Strategists deal with conflict more comfortably than do those with other action logics, and they’re better at handling people’s instinctive resistance to change. As a result, Strategists are highly effective change agents. We found confirmation of this in our recent study of ten CEOs in six different industries. All of their organizations had the stated objective of transforming themselves and had engaged consultants to help with the process. Each CEO filled out a Leadership Development Profile, which showed that five of them were Strate-

*What sets Alchemists apart from Strategists is their ability to renew or even reinvent themselves and their organizations in historically significant ways.*

gists and the other five fell into other action logics. The Strategists succeeded in generating one or more organizational transformations over a four-year period; their companies' profitability, market share, and reputation all improved. By contrast, only two of the other five CEOs succeeded in transforming their organizations—despite help from consultants, who themselves profiled as Strategists.

Strategists are fascinated with three distinct levels of social interplay: personal relationships, organizational relations, and national and international developments. Consider Joan Bavaria, a CEO who, back in 1985, measured as a Strategist. Bavaria created one of the first socially responsible investment funds, a new subdivision of the investments industry, which by the end of 2001 managed more than \$3 trillion in funds. In 1982, Bavaria founded Trillium Asset Management, a worker-owned company, which she still heads. She also cowrote the CERES Environmental Principles, which dozens of major companies have signed. In the late 1990s, CERES, working with the United Nations, created the Global Reporting Initiative, which supports financial, social, and environmental transparency and accountability worldwide.

Here we see the Strategist action logic at work. Bavaria saw a unique moment in which to make ethical investing a viable business, then established Trillium to execute her plan. Strategists typically have socially conscious business ideas that are carried out in a highly collaborative manner. They seek to weave together idealist visions with pragmatic, timely initiatives and principled actions. Bavaria worked beyond the boundaries of her own organization to influence the socially responsible investment industry as a whole and later made the development of social and environmental accountability standards an international endeavor by involving the United Nations. Many Achievers will use their influence to successfully promote their own companies. The Strategist works to create ethical principles and practices beyond the interests of herself or her organization.

### **The Alchemist**

The final leadership action logic for which we have data and experience is the Alchemist. Our studies of the few leaders we have identified as Alchemists suggest that what sets them apart from Strategists is their ability to renew or

even reinvent themselves and their organizations in historically significant ways. Whereas the Strategist will move from one engagement to another, the Alchemist has an extraordinary capacity to deal simultaneously with many situations at multiple levels. The Alchemist can talk with both kings and commoners. He can deal with immediate priorities yet never lose sight of long-term goals.

Alchemists constitute 1% of our sample, which indicates how rare it is to find them in business or anywhere else. Through an extensive search process, we found six Alchemists who were willing to participate in an up-close study of their daily actions. Though this is obviously a very small number that cannot statistically justify generalization, it's worth noting that all six Alchemists shared certain characteristics. On a daily basis, all were engaged in multiple organizations and found time to deal with issues raised by each. However, they were not in a constant rush—nor did they devote hours on end to a single activity. Alchemists are typically charismatic and extremely aware individuals who live by high moral standards. They focus intensely on the truth. Perhaps most important, they're able to catch unique moments in the history of their organizations, creating symbols and metaphors that speak to people's hearts and minds. In one conservative financial services company in the UK, a recently appointed CEO turned up for work in a tracksuit instead of his usual pinstripes but said nothing about it to anyone. People wondered whether this was a new dress code. Weeks later, the CEO spoke publicly about his attire and the need to be unconventional and to move with greater agility and speed.

A more celebrated example of an Alchemist is Nelson Mandela. Although we never formally profiled Mandela, he exemplifies the Alchemist action logic. In 1995, Mandela symbolized the unity of a new South Africa when he attended the Rugby World Cup game in which the Springboks, the South African national team, were playing. Rugby had been the bastion of white supremacy, but Mandela attended the game. He walked on to the pitch wearing the Springboks' jersey so hated by black South Africans, at the same time giving the clenched fist salute of the ANC, thereby appealing, almost impossibly, both to black and white South Africans. As Tokyo Sexwale, ANC activist and premier of South Africa's

Gauteng province, said of him: “Only Mandela could wear an enemy jersey. Only Mandela would go down there and be associated with the Springboks...All the years in the underground, in the trenches, denial, self-denial, away from home, prison, it was worth it. That’s all we wanted to see.”

### **Evolving as a Leader**

The most remarkable—and encouraging—finding from our research is that leaders can transform from one action logic to another. We have, in fact, documented a number of leaders who have succeeded in transforming themselves from Experts into Achievers, from Achievers into Individualists, and from Individualists into Strategists.

Take the case of Jenny, one of our clients, who initially measured as an Expert. She became disillusioned with her role in her company’s PR department and resigned in order to, as she said, “sort out what I really want to do.” Six months later, she joined a different company in a similar role, and two years after that we profiled her again and she still measured as an Expert. Her decision to resign from the first company, take a “sabbatical,” and then join the second company had made no difference to her action logic. At that point, Jenny chose to join a group of peer leaders committed to examining their current leadership patterns and to experimenting with new ways of acting. This group favored the Strategist perspective (and the founder of the group was profiled as an Alchemist), which in the end helped Jenny’s development. She learned that her habit of consistently taking a critical position, which she considered “usefully objective,” isolated her and generated distrust. As a result of the peer group’s feedback, she started a series of small and private experiments, such as asking questions rather than criticizing. She realized that instead of seeing the faults in others, she had to be clear about what *she* could contribute and, in doing so, started the move from an Expert to an Achiever. Spiritually, Jenny learned that she needed an ongoing community of inquiry at the center of her life and found a spiritual home for continuing reflection in Quaker meetings, which later supported (and indeed signaled) her transition from an Achiever to an Individualist.

Two years later, Jenny left the second job to start her own company, at which point she

began profiling as a Strategist. This was a highly unusual movement of three action logics in such a short time. We have had only two other instances in which a leader has transformed twice in less than four years.

As Jenny’s case illustrates, there are a number of personal changes that can support leadership transformation. Jenny experienced loss of faith in the system and feelings of boredom, irritability, burnout, depression, and even anger. She began to ask herself existential questions. But another indication of a leader’s readiness to transform is an increasing attraction to the qualities she begins to intuit in people with more effective action logics. Jenny, as we saw, was drawn to and benefited hugely from her Strategist peer group as well as from a mentor who exhibited the Alchemist action logic. This search for new perspectives often manifests itself in personal transformations: The ready-to-transform leader starts developing new relationships. She may also explore new forms of spiritual practice or new forms of centering and self-expression, such as playing a musical instrument or doing tai chi.

External events can also trigger and support transformation. A promotion, for example, may give a leader the opportunity to expand his or her range of capabilities. Earlier, we cited the frustration of Expert research engineers at Hewlett-Packard with the product and delivery attitude of Achiever lab managers. Within a year of one engineer’s promotion to lab manager, a role that required coordination of others and cooperation across departments, the former Expert was profiling as an Achiever. Although he initially took some heat (“Sellout!”) from his former buddies, his new Achiever awareness meant that he was more focused on customers’ needs and clearer about delivery schedules. For the first time, he understood the dance between engineers trying to perfect the technology and managers trying to deliver on budget and on schedule.

Changes to a manager’s work practices and environment can also facilitate transformation. At one company we studied, leaders changed from Achievers to Individualists partly because of simple organizational and process changes. At the company’s senior manager meetings, for example, executives other than the CEO had the chance to lead the meetings; these opportunities, which were supported by new spirit of openness, feedback, and frank debate,



fostered professional growth among many of the company's leaders.

Planned and structured development interventions are another means of supporting leadership transformation. We worked with a leading oil and gas exploration company on developing the already high-level capabilities of a pool of future senior managers; the managers were profiled and then interviewed by two consultants who explored each manager's action logic and how it constrained and enabled him or her to perform current and recent roles. Challenges were discussed as well as a view of the individual's potential and a possible developmental plan. After the exercise, several managers, whose Individualist and Strategist capabilities had not been fully understood by the company, were appreciated and engaged differently in their roles. What's more, the organization's own definition of leadership talent was reframed to include the capabilities of the Individualist and Strategist action logics. This in turn demanded that the company radically revisit its competency framework to incorporate such expectations as "sees issues from multiple perspectives" and "creates deep change without formal power."

Now that we've looked generally at some of the changes and interventions that can support leadership development, let's turn to some specifics about how the most common transformations are apt to take place.

### From Expert to Achiever

This transformation is the most commonly observed and practiced among businesspeople and by those in management and executive education. For the past generation or more, the training departments of large companies have been supporting the development of managers from Experts into Achievers by running programs with titles like "Management by Objectives," "Effective Delegation," and "Managing People for Results." These programs typically emphasize getting results through flexible strategies rather than through one right method used in one right way.

Observant leaders and executive coaches can also formulate well-structured exercises and questions related to everyday work to help Experts become aware of the different assumptions they and others may be making. These efforts can help Experts practice new conversational strategies such as, "You may be right, but

I'd like to understand what leads you to believe that." In addition, those wishing to push Experts to the next level should consider rewarding Achiever competencies like timely delivery of results, the ability to manage for performance, and the ability to implement strategic priorities.

Within business education, MBA programs are apt to encourage the development of the more pragmatic Achievers by frustrating the perfectionist Experts. The heavy workloads, use of multidisciplinary and ambiguous case studies, and teamwork requirements all promote the development of Achievers. By contrast, MSc programs, in particular disciplines such as finance or marketing research, tend to reinforce the Expert perspective.

Still, the transition from Expert to Achiever remains one of the most painful bottlenecks in most organizations. We've all heard the eternal lament of engineers, lawyers, and other professionals whose Expert success has saddled them with managerial duties, only to estrange them from the work they love. Their challenge becomes working as highly effective Achievers who can continue to use their in-depth expertise to succeed as leaders and managers.

### From Achiever to Individualist

Although organizations and business schools have been relatively successful in developing leaders to the Achiever action logic, they have, with few exceptions, a dismal record in recognizing, supporting, and *actively* developing leaders to the Individualist and Strategist action logics, let alone to the Alchemist logic. This is not surprising. In many organizations, the Achiever, with his drive and focus on the endgame, is seen as the finish line for development: "This is a competitive industry—we need to keep a sharp focus on the bottom line."

The development of leaders beyond the Achiever action logic requires a very different tack from that necessary to bring about the Expert-to-Achiever transformation. Interventions must encourage self-awareness on the part of the evolving leader as well as a greater awareness of other worldviews. In both business and personal relationships, speaking and listening must come to be experienced not as necessary, taken-for-granted ways of communicating predetermined ideas but as intrinsically forward-thinking, creative actions. Achievers use inquiry to determine whether they (and

the teams and organization to which they belong) are accomplishing their goals and how they might accomplish them more effectively. The developing Individualist, however, begins to inquire about and reflect on the goals themselves—with the aim of improving future goals. Annual development plans that set new goals, are generated through probing and trusting conversation, are actively supported through executive coaching, and are carefully reviewed at the end of the cycle can be critical enablers at this point. Yet few boards and CEOs appreciate how valuable this time investment can be, and it is all too easily sacrificed in the face of short-term objectives, which can seem more pressing to leaders whose action logics are less developed.

Let's go back to the case of Sharon, the Individualist we described earlier whose Achiever CEO wasn't able to manage her. How might a coach or consultant have helped the CEO feel less threatened by Sharon and more capable of supporting her development while also being more open to his own needs and potential? One way would have been to try role-playing, asking the CEO to play Sharon while the coach or consultant enacts the CEO role. The role-playing might have gone as follows:

"Sharon, I want to talk with you about your future here at our company. Your completion of the Czech project under budget and ahead of time is one more sign that you have the initiative, creativity, and determination to make the senior team here. At the same time, I've had to pick up a number of pieces after you that I shouldn't have had to. I'd like to brainstorm together about how you can approach future projects in a way that eliminates this hassle and gets key players on your side. Then, we can chat several times over the next year as you begin to apply whatever new principles we come up with. Does this seem like a good use of our time, or do you have a different perspective on the issue?"

Note that the consultant in the CEO's role offers clear praise, a clear description of a limitation, a proposed path forward, and an inquiry that empowers the CEO (playing Sharon) to reframe the dilemma if he wishes. Thus, instead of giving the CEO one-way advice about what he should do, the coach enacts a dialogic scenario with him, illustrating a new kind of practice and letting the CEO judge whether the enacted relationship is a positive

one. The point is not so much to teach the CEO a new conversational repertoire but to make him more comfortable with how the Individualist sees and makes sense of the world around her and what feedback may motivate her to commit to further learning. Such specific experiments with new ways of listening and talking can gradually dissolve the fears associated with transformational learning.

### To Strategist and Beyond

Leaders who are moving toward the Strategist and Alchemist action logics are no longer primarily seeking personal skills that will make them more effective within existing organizational systems. They will already have mastered many of those skills. Rather, they are exploring the disciplines and commitments entailed in creating projects, teams, networks, strategic alliances, and whole organizations on the basis of collaborative inquiry. It is this ongoing practice of reframing inquiry that makes them and their corporations so successful.

The path toward the Strategist and Alchemist action logics is qualitatively different from other leadership development processes. For a start, emergent Strategists and Alchemists are no longer seeking mentors to help them sharpen existing skills and to guide them toward influential networks (although they may seek spiritual and ethical guidance from mentors). Instead, they are seeking to engage in mutual mentoring with peers who are already part of their networks (such as board members, top managers, or leaders within a scientific discipline). The objective of this senior-peer mentoring is not, in conventional terms, to increase the chances of success but to create a sustainable community of people who can challenge the emergent leader's assumptions and practices and those of his company, industry, or other area of activity.

We witnessed just this kind of peer-to-peer development when one senior client became concerned that he, his company, and the industry as a whole were operating at the Achiever level. This concern, of course, was itself a sign of his readiness to transform beyond that logic. This executive—the CEO of a dental hygiene company—and his company were among the most successful of the parent company's subsidiaries. However, realizing that he and those around him had been keeping their heads down, he chose to initiate a research project—

on introducing affordable dental hygiene in developing countries—that was decidedly out of the box for him and for the corporation.

The CEO's timing was right for such an initiative, and he used the opportunity to engage in collaborative inquiry with colleagues across the country. Eventually, he proposed an educational and charitable venture, which the parent company funded. The executive was promoted to a new vice presidency for international ventures within the parent company—a role he exercised with an increased sense of collaboration and a greater feeling of social responsibility for his company in emerging markets.

Formal education and development processes can also guide individuals toward a Strategist action logic. Programs in which participants act as leaders and challenge their conventional assumptions about leading and organizing are very effective. Such programs will be either long term (one or two years) or repeated, intense experiences that nurture the moment-to-moment awareness of participants, always providing the shock of dissonance that stimulates them to reexamine their worldviews. Path-breaking programs of this type can be found at a few universities and consultancies around the globe. Bath University in the UK, for instance, sponsors a two-year master's degree in responsibility and business practice in which students work together during six one-week get-togethers. These programs involve small-learning teams, autobiographical writing, psychodrama, deep experiences in nature, and a yearlong business project that involves action and reflection. Interestingly, many people who attend these programs report that these experiences have had the transformative power of a life-altering event, such as a career or existential crisis or a new marriage.

### **Leadership Teams and Leadership Cultures Within Organizations**

So far, our discussion has focused on the leadership styles of individuals. But we have found that our categories of leadership styles can be used to describe teams and organizations as well. Here we will talk briefly about the action logics of teams.

Over the long term, the most effective teams are those with a Strategist culture, in which the group sees business challenges as opportunities for growth and learning on the

part of both individuals and the organization. A leadership team at one of the companies we worked with decided to invite managers from across departments to participate in time-to-market new product teams. Seen as a risky distraction, few managers volunteered, except for some Individualists and budding Strategists. However, senior management provided sufficient support and feedback to ensure the teams' early success. Soon, the first participants were promoted and leading their own cross-departmental teams. The Achievers in the organization, seeing that others were being promoted, started volunteering for these teams. Gradually, more people within the organization were experiencing shared leadership, mutual testing of one another's assumptions and practices, and individual challenges that contributed to their development as leaders.

Sadly, few companies use teams in this way. Most senior manager teams operate at the Achiever action logic—they prefer unambiguous targets and deadlines, and working with clear strategies, tactics, and plans, often against tight deadlines. They thrive in a climate of adversity (“When the going gets tough, the tough get going”) and derive great pleasure from pulling together and delivering. Typically, the team's leaders and several other members will be Achievers, with several Experts and perhaps one or two Individualists or Strategists (who typically feel ignored). Such Achiever teams are often impatient at slowing down to reflect, are apt to dismiss questions about goals and assumptions as “endless philosophizing,” and typically respond with hostile humor to creative exercises, calling them “off-the-wall” diversions. These behaviors will ultimately limit an Achiever team's success.

The situation is worse at large, mature companies where senior management teams operate as Experts. Here, vice presidents see themselves as chiefs and their “teams” as an information-reporting formality. Team life is bereft of shared problem-solving, decision-making, or strategy-formulating efforts. Senior teams limited by the Diplomat action logic are even less functional. They are characterized by strong status differences, undiscussable norms, and ritual “court” ceremonies that are carefully stage-managed.

Individualist teams, which are more likely to be found in creative, consulting, and non-profit organizations, are relatively rare and

very different from Achiever, Expert, and Diplomat teams. In contrast to Achiever teams, they may be strongly reflective; in fact, excessive time may be spent reviewing goals, assumptions, and work practices. Because individual concerns and input are very important to these teams, rapid decision making may be difficult.

But like individual people, teams can change their style. For instance, we've seen Strategist CEOs help Individualist senior teams balance action and inquiry and so transform into Strategist teams. Another example is an Achiever senior team in a financial services company we worked with that was emerging from two years of harsh cost cutting during a market downturn. To adapt to a changing and growing financial services market, the company needed to become significantly more visionary and innovative and learn how to engage its workforce. To lead this transformation, the team had to start with itself. We worked with it to help team members understand the constraints of the Achiever orientation, which required a number of interventions over time. We began by working to improve the way the team discussed issues and by coaching individual members, including the CEO. As the team evolved, it became apparent that its composition needed to change: Two senior executives, who had initially seemed ideally suited to the group because of their achievements, had to be replaced when it became clear that they were unwilling to engage and experiment with the new approach.

During this reorientation, which lasted

slightly more than two years, the team became an Individualist group with emergent Strategist capabilities. The CEO, who had profiled at Achiever/Individualist, now profiled as a Strategist, and most other team members showed one developmental move forward. The impact of this was also felt in the team's and organization's ethos: Once functionally divided, the team learned to accept and integrate the diverse opinions of its members. Employee surveys reported increased engagement across the company. Outsiders began seeing the company as ahead of the curve, which meant the organization was better able to attract top talent. In the third year, bottom- and top-line results were well ahead of industry competitors.

• • •

The leader's voyage of development is not an easy one. Some people change little in their lifetimes; some change substantially. Despite the undeniably crucial role of genetics, human nature is not fixed. Those who are willing to work at developing themselves and becoming more self-aware can almost certainly evolve over time into truly transformational leaders. Few may become Alchemists, but many will have the desire and potential to become Individualists and Strategists. Corporations that help their executives and leadership teams examine their action logics can reap rich rewards.

---

Reprint [R0504D](#)

To order, see the next page

or call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500

or go to [www.hbr.org](http://www.hbr.org)



*Harvard Business Review* OnPoint articles enhance the full-text article with a summary of its key points and a selection of its company examples to help you quickly absorb and apply the concepts. *Harvard Business Review* OnPoint collections include three OnPoint articles and an overview comparing the various perspectives on a specific topic.

---

## Further Reading

### *The Harvard Business Review* Paperback Series

Here are the landmark ideas—both contemporary and classic—that have established *Harvard Business Review* as required reading for businesspeople around the globe. Each paperback includes eight of the leading articles on a particular business topic. The series includes over thirty titles, including the following best-sellers:

#### [Harvard Business Review on Brand Management](#)

Product no. 1445

#### [Harvard Business Review on Change](#)

Product no. 8842

#### [Harvard Business Review on Leadership](#)

Product no. 8834

#### [Harvard Business Review on Managing People](#)

Product no. 9075

#### [Harvard Business Review on Measuring Corporate Performance](#)

Product no. 8826

For a complete list of the *Harvard Business Review* paperback series, go to [www.hbr.org](http://www.hbr.org).

---

## Harvard Business Review

### To Order

For reprints, *Harvard Business Review* OnPoint orders, and subscriptions to *Harvard Business Review*:  
Call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500.  
Go to [www.hbr.org](http://www.hbr.org)

For customized and quantity orders of reprints and *Harvard Business Review* OnPoint products:  
Call Frank Tamoshunas at 617-783-7626,  
or e-mail him at [ftamoshunas@hbsp.harvard.edu](mailto:ftamoshunas@hbsp.harvard.edu)