Good Leadership in UK Business

The Oxford Character Project

September 2023

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

The Oxford Character Project
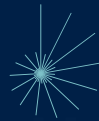
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THE OXFORD CHARACTER PROJECT

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Foreword

The Forward Institute and Oxford Character Project are passionate about the role of good leaders in making the world better. We believe that leaders profoundly shape the nature of organisations – how they operate, the decisions they make and the principles underpinning them.

Amidst turbulence and disruption in the world, calls for better leadership grow louder. Not only do we want more, but the failure to deliver leadership that employees deserve and society needs is increasingly visible.

Yet away from leadership books and articles, what do we really mean by 'better'? What is commonly meant by 'good leadership'? And does this understanding differ across sectors? These questions formed the backdrop for this research.

The report shows convincingly that for most employees in UK business the character of their leaders matters. Over 50% of the top 20 features of good leaders identified relate not to competence or interpersonal skill, but rather to character.

This reinforces what most of us intuitively know. But despite this most attempts to foster 'good leadership' still focus almost exclusively on a set of behaviours or competences that individuals or organisations wish to develop.

So I hope that you enjoy this report, that it stimulates your thinking, but above all that it makes a contribution to individuals and organisations becoming more thoughtful about how they can help foster the leadership our world needs.

Adam Grodecki
Founder & Chief Executive
Forward Institute

Executive summary

Good leadership is essential for businesses to perform at their best—to maintain a positive culture, make the most of opportunities for growth, return value to their stakeholders, and navigate the uncertainties and challenges they face. Proposals for what such leadership should look like are widely published and applied in frameworks and educational programmes delivered by firms, business schools, and leadership consultancies. Such theoretical and normative approaches are valuable but also important is the view on the ground— the understanding or 'prototype' of good leadership within UK business.

How do employees in UK firms understand good leadership? Do ideas of good leadership vary between gender, age, education, or leadership level? Do different sectors have different leadership prototypes? The prototype of good leadership often lies beneath the surface but its importance is present in the way it shapes the interpretation of what leaders do, the expectations that are set, and the performance of leadership roles. It may be important to question the existing prototype and introduce new ideas but a clear grasp of how good leadership is understood is an essential starting point.

This report presents research by the Oxford Character Project into good leadership in UK business, involving over 1,100 participants working in 36 firms around the UK.

- Participants identified 84 features, reflecting three dimensions of good leadership: Character, professional competence, and interpersonal skills.

- Character is central to good leadership: 52% of features relate to character, 35% to interpersonal skills, 13% to professional competence.

- Kindness, creativity, and humility are widely considered important for good leadership but were rated by participants among the five least central features.

- There is a high degree of consensus between genders and across leadership levels.

- Participants with higher levels of education consider it less central that leaders are caring, friendly, helpful, and kind.

- Millennials and Gen Zs value leaders who are attentive and committed to mentoring, and who can provide answers to questions and solutions to problems.

- Across the sectors of finance, law, and technology, leaders are expected to be competent, hardworking, and committed. Beyond these qualities, however, there are distinct profiles between sectors.

Introduction

Shared ideas and expectations of good leadership play an important role in shaping what leaders focus on, the ways in which they operate, who is viewed as a leader, and how we invest in leadership development. At a time of significant uncertainty when we are faced with major economic, social, and environmental challenges in the UK and globally, the need for good leadership in business and across sectors is more pressing than ever.

How is good leadership understood in UK business?

What do different groups within the business community expect from their leaders?

What aspects of competence and character are most important?

The collective understanding or 'prototype' of good leadership may vary between contexts. Leadership in business overlaps with leadership in politics, medicine, and education, but there are important differences between sectors. There are also cultural factors which bear upon how leadership is viewed in different places and times.

Leadership is not only about *what* is achieved but *how*. Leaders are judged by their actions and accomplishments but also as people—for their vision, character, and commitment.

This report focuses on UK business, where shifting expectations of the role of business in society have an impact on what it means to lead. Professional competence is as vital as ever but the systemic and interconnected nature of many business challenges has called into question the ideal of the heroic CEO and brought collaborative leadership practices to the fore.[1] Increased societal emphasis on personal wellbeing and greater awareness of the relationship between employee wellbeing and business performance has elevated the standing of kindness and empathy.[2] The urgency of global challenges such as those encapsulated in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, and the need to do more and move faster, has resulted in calls for courageous moral leadership.[3]

Our research highlights the central importance of character and interpersonal skills for business leaders. Leadership is not only about *what* is achieved but *how*. Leaders are judged by their actions and accomplishments but also as people—for their vision, character, and commitment.

Rachel Johnson
Oxford Character Project Finance Symposium
University of Oxford, October 2022

Research

Good leadership that is both effective and ethical is vital if businesses are to face the challenges before them and grow into the future. Businesses have an essential role to play in addressing the economic, social, and environmental challenges that face us around the world and that threaten the prosperity of society. What does it look like to lead in a way that brings business and societal benefits together?

The media most often picks up on examples of bad leadership, and it is important to learn from failure. It is also important to have a clear vision of what good leadership looks like and a plan to make progress towards it. The work of the Oxford Character Project seeks to bring clarity to the meaning of good leadership across sectors, focusing in particular on the character that leaders need to perform consistently at the highest level in all aspects of their role. Our educational programmes help present and future leaders to develop character qualities such as courage, wisdom, honesty, humility, love, and hope.

What does good leadership look like?

We sought to answer three questions:

1

How do employees in UK firms understand good leadership?

2

Do ideas of good leadership vary between gender, age, education, or leadership level?

3

Do different sectors have different leadership prototypes?

Rather than focusing on a single theory or style of leadership, we sought to identify the shared idea or prototype of good leadership held by those working in businesses in the UK.

This perspective is vital since perceptions of good leadership drive interpretation, expectations, and performance.[4]

Method

We employed a method known as prototype analysis, surveying 1,158 participants working around the UK in 36 different firms in the financial services, technology, and legal sectors. Our approach involved two studies, conducted with two groups of participants. The second study built on the results of the first.

Study 1

Free generation: Participants in group A were asked to freely generate features of good leadership in their sector.

Study 2

Centrality assessment: Participants in group B were asked to rate the features identified by group A, assessing them according to their centrality for good leadership on a scale between 1 (almost never true) and 7 (almost always true).

Participants across sectors identified 84 features of good leadership, which are presented in the table below in order of centrality along with the mean centrality assessment and standard deviation for each feature. Further detail of the method can be found in the technical methodology section, below.

Sarah Gillard
Oxford Character Project Law Symposium
University of Oxford, February 2023

Three dimensions of good leadership:
Character, competence, and interpersonal skills

The features of good leadership identified by people working within UK business reflect a three-dimensional picture. Good leadership involves character, professional competence, and interpersonal skills. All three of these aspects are vital and each of them requires focused attention when it comes to leadership development in organisations and business schools.*

● **Professional competence** refers to the professional knowledge, cognitive abilities, and skills that enable individuals to perform leadership tasks to a high standard.

● **Interpersonal skills** refer to the interpersonal understanding and skills necessary to perform leadership tasks to a high standard given the essentially relational nature of good leadership.

● **Character** refers to habits or dispositions of thought, emotion, and action that in their developed state are stable over time and consistent across contexts.

"Great leaders have historically been celebrated for technical expertise, but when you ask people about the leaders who have really made an impact on them it has been about a whole host of things, primarily about how they made them feel. Did they create an environment where people could be at their best, bring all of their human capabilities, bring all of their curiosity and creativity and collaboration into the workplace, and create something that they actually feel proud of?"

– Sarah Gillard, CEO, Blueprint for Better Business

*Categorisation according to professional competence, character, and interpersonal skills was conducted by two researchers who analysed the data independently before resolving discrepancies in conversation. There is significant overlap between character qualities and interpersonal skills since character has an important interpersonal dimension. However, some strengths of character may be stable traits that are only evidenced in interpersonal contexts. Where an interpersonal context is necessary for a feature to be exhibited (e.g. collaboration) we classed the feature as an interpersonal skill.

Good leadership in UK business

● **Character**   ● **Interpersonal skills**   ● **Professional competence**

	Feature of good leadership	Centrality (scale 1-7)	Standard deviation
● 1.	Competent	6.26	0.94
● 2.	Communication skills	6.24	1.02
● 3.	Integrity	6.22	1.02
● 4.	Hardworking	6.21	0.92
● 5.	Professional	6.18	1.00
● 6.	Responsible	6.18	0.96
● 7.	Committed	6.18	0.90
● 8.	Resilient	6.14	0.90
● 9.	Trustworthy	6.13	1.09
● 10.	Confident	6.11	0.88
● 11.	Knowledgeable	6.10	0.96
● 12.	Provides direction	6.10	1.00
● 13.	Risk aware	6.09	1.02
● 14.	Honesty	6.07	1.11
● 15.	Accountable	6.07	1.06
● 16.	Expertise	6.06	0.87
● 17.	Focused	6.06	1.01
● 18.	Driven	6.06	0.96
● 19.	Decisive	6.04	0.99
● 20.	Strategic	6.02	1.02
● 21.	Solves problems	6.00	0.96

	Feature of good leadership	Centrality (scale 1-7)	Standard deviation
● 22.	Ethical	5.99	1.11
● 23.	Experienced	5.99	1.02
● 24.	Respectful	5.98	1.03
● 25.	Listens	5.96	1.13
● 26.	Delegates	5.96	1.04
● 27.	Shares knowledge	5.94	1.05
● 28.	Intelligent	5.94	1.05
● 29.	Encouraging	5.93	1.09
● 30.	Influential	5.92	1.04
● 31.	Clear	5.92	1.06
● 32.	Supportive	5.90	1.09
● 33.	Collaborative	5.88	1.07
● 34.	Motivator	5.88	1.12
● 35.	Approachable	5.86	1.19
● 36.	Team builder	5.85	1.06
● 37.	Positive	5.85	1.04
● 38.	Fair	5.84	1.12
● 39.	Adaptable	5.83	1.09
● 40.	Develops others	5.83	1.23
● 41.	Empowering	5.83	1.15
● 42.	Gives feedback	5.83	1.14

	Feature of good leadership	Centrality (scale 1-7)	Standard deviation
●	43. Role model	5.83	1.19
●	44. Responsive	5.81	1.07
●	45. Inclusive	5.79	1.23
●	46. Consistent	5.78	1.12
●	47. Team player	5.78	1.17
●	48. Ambitious	5.78	1.11
●	49. Enthusiastic	5.77	1.07
●	50. Willing to learn	5.75	1.20
●	51. Inspiring	5.75	1.19
●	52. Human	5.74	1.20
●	53. Organised	5.74	1.11
●	54. Understanding	5.74	1.12
●	55. Open minded	5.73	1.13
●	56. Authentic	5.71	1.22
●	57. Emotionally intelligent	5.71	1.30
●	58. Challenger	5.68	1.06
●	59. Attentive	5.65	1.15
●	60. Calm	5.64	1.10
●	61. Balanced	5.64	1.16
●	62. Helpful	5.62	1.14
●	63. Mentors others	5.62	1.22

	Feature of good leadership	Centrality (scale 1-7)	Standard deviation
●	64. Self aware	5.62	1.23
●	65. Flexible	5.60	1.19
●	66. Curious	5.60	1.17
●	67. Thoughtful	5.59	1.08
●	68. Open	5.58	1.21
●	69. Empathetic	5.53	1.26
●	70. Direct	5.53	1.09
●	71. Technically competent	5.48	1.28
●	72. Available	5.47	1.22
●	73. Compassionate	5.46	1.23
●	74. Transparent	5.41	1.33
●	75. Energetic	5.41	1.17
●	76. Friendly	5.38	1.15
●	77. Caring	5.33	1.29
●	78. Visionary	5.32	1.30
●	79. Patient	5.27	1.30
●	80. Kind	5.21	1.24
●	81. Charismatic	5.19	1.22
●	82. Creative	5.0	1.32
●	83. Humble	4.79	1.43
●	84. Humorous	4.79	1.23

Table 1: Features of good leadership in business according to current UK professionals, ranked according to mean centrality (scale from 1 to 7). NB: Terms are listed in the form given by participants.

Character and leadership

Character is a constellation of habits or dispositions that shape how a person thinks, feels, and acts. Character is stable across contexts and over time but it is not static. Character can be developed by habitual practice and is shaped by the stories we tell, the people around us, and the cultures of the organisations we inhabit.

Virtues are excellences of character that accord with good performance in a specific domain or in life as a whole. Character can be broken down into moral virtues (such as honesty and fairness), intellectual virtues (such as open-mindedness and judgement), civic virtues (such as friendliness, helpfulness), and performance virtues (such as resilience and commitment).[5]

Character takes us beneath specific actions and accomplishments to the foundational level of who a leader is. It is particularly as a function of their character that leaders serve as role models who set the tone for organisational culture through their words and actions.

- Character drives moral leadership through qualities such as integrity, responsibility, and honesty.

- Character drives thought leadership through qualities such as open-mindedness and curiosity.

- Character drives high-performance leadership through the combination of moral and intellectual virtues with performance virtues such as drive, resilience, and calm.
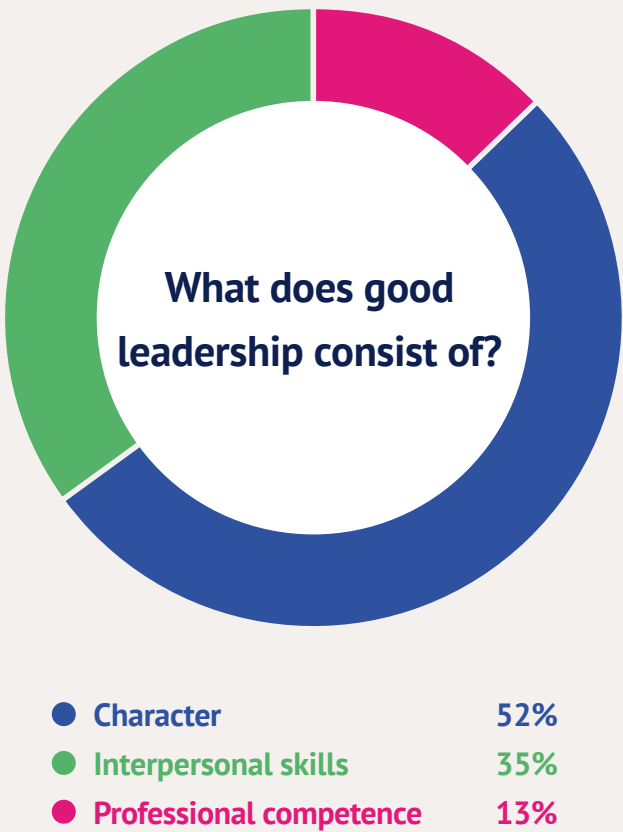
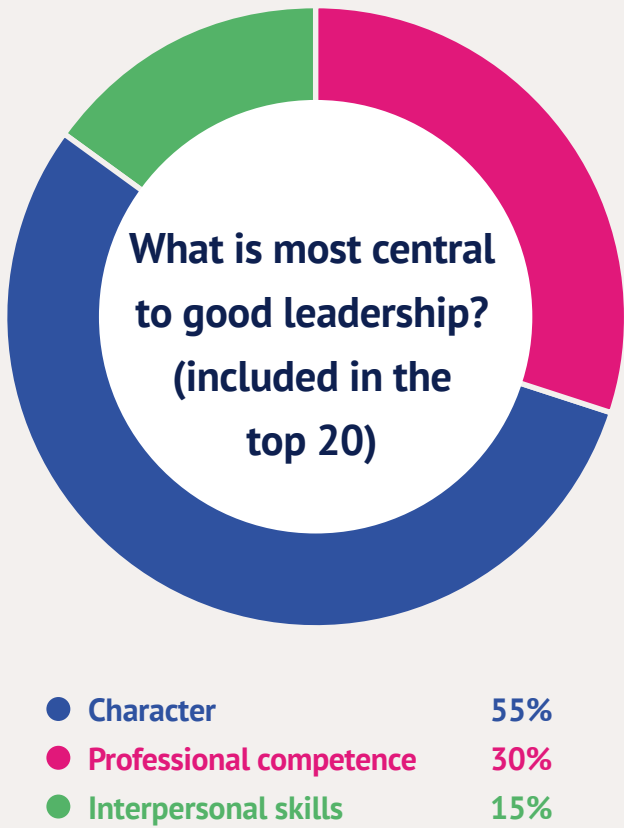Figure 1: Proportion of features in each category

What does good leadership consist of?

● Character   52%
● Interpersonal skills   35%
● Professional competence   13%

What is most central to good leadership? (included in the top 20)

Figure 2: Proportion of the top 20 most central features in each category

● Character   55%
● Professional competence   30%
● Interpersonal skills   15%

Undervalued virtues: Kindness, creativity, and humility

Character is prominent at the top of the list but there are also some important character qualities lower down. Kindness, creativity, and humility are among the bottom five and yet are vital for good leadership across domains.

Five least central features of good leadership according to survey participants

●	80. Kind	5.20
●	81. Charismatic	5.19
●	82. Creative	5.00
●	83. Humble	4.79
●	84. Humorous	4.79

Kindness in leadership points to the importance of relating to people not simply as economic agents but in view of their full humanity.

Kindness is an interpersonal quality that has come to the fore as an emphasis in leadership research and practice, especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Leadership research has drawn attention to the importance of kindness for good leadership across sectors and identified ways in which it is manifested, including altruism, care, compassion, empathy, fairness, and respect.[6] Kindness in leadership has been championed in the UK by the Leading Lights list, which appears each year in the Financial Times, and has been supported by such prominent figures as Jurgen Klopp, Manager of Liverpool Football Club (listed in 2019), Alan Jope, CEO of Unilever (listed in 2021), Charlie Nunn, CEO of Lloyds Banking Group (keynote speaker in 2022), Lisa Fernihough, Chief People Officer of KPMG UK (member of the judging panel in 2023).[7]

Creativity is essential for leaders to navigate change successfully, identify new opportunities and approaches, and find solutions to important business challenges.

Research conducted by the Oxford Character Project into the values of 221 leading UK firms found creativity to be the fifth most listed value in UK business,[8] and the World

Economic Forum listed creative thinking as the second most important workplace skill needed in 2023.[9]

It is a mistake for leaders to focus on creativity in a way that displaces attention to routine responsibilities or neglects performance data, but if creativity is not modelled and encouraged by leaders it will be hard for businesses to exhibit the creativity they value and make use of it to optimise performance.[10]

Humility is not about holding a low view of oneself; it is about holding an *accurate* view.

Humility has long been identified as important for high performance leadership.[11] A low view of humility's importance may stem from a mistaken understanding that confuses humility with self-deprecation or low self-esteem.

As psychologists Peter Hill and Elizabeth Laney put it, humility is a "non-defensive willingness to see oneself accurately by acknowledging one's personal limitations, combined with an appreciation for the strengths and contributions from which one can learn."[12] Understood this way, it is clear why humility is so important. Accurate self-understanding of what a leader knows and what they are able to do guards against the arrogance that often accrues with power. It opens space for ongoing learning and growth, and it underlies committed collaboration.

"Kindness is just a manifestation of basic respect for other people. I've found that treating the people I have the privilege to lead with kindness, respect and common decency, significantly increases their willingness to go the extra mile to deliver great results. Kindness must not be at the expense of performance... just the opposite, it can be a powerful cultural accelerator of performance."

– Alan Jope,
former Chief Executive Officer, Unilever

Leading with Kindness Lecture by Women of the Future in partnership with the Oxford Character Project, featuring guest speaker, Charlie Nunn, Executive Director & Group Chief Executive, Lloyds Banking Group, November 2022

Non-managers place greater value on leaders being knowledgeable and helpful

We looked closely at the results for each feature to determine whether perceptions of good leadership differ according to leadership level. Our analysis found a high degree of consensus, with no statistically significant differences for 82 out of 84 features. The two points of difference concern the importance of being helpful and knowledgeable, which were rated significantly more central to good leadership by those without any direct reports than by managers or senior leaders.
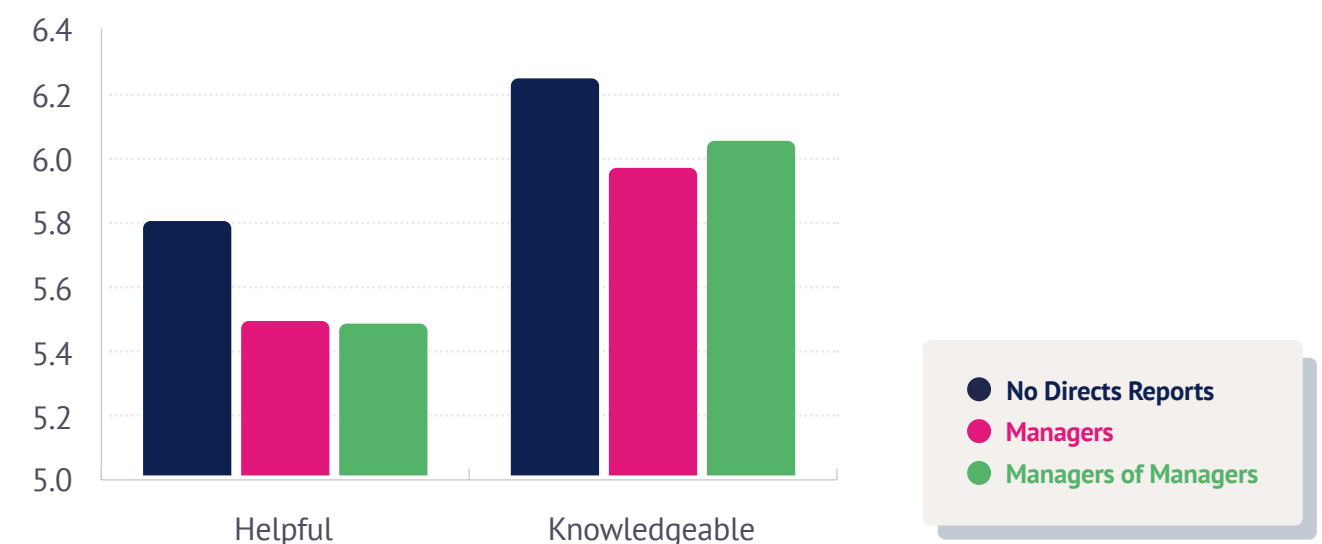

● No Directs Reports
● Managers
● Managers of Managers

Figure 3: Significant differences in feature centrality according to leadership level (scale from 1 to 7)

Henrietta Dayo-Somefun
The Future of Leadership roundtable, co-
sponsored by the Oxford Character Project and
the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship.
Saïd Business School, February 2023

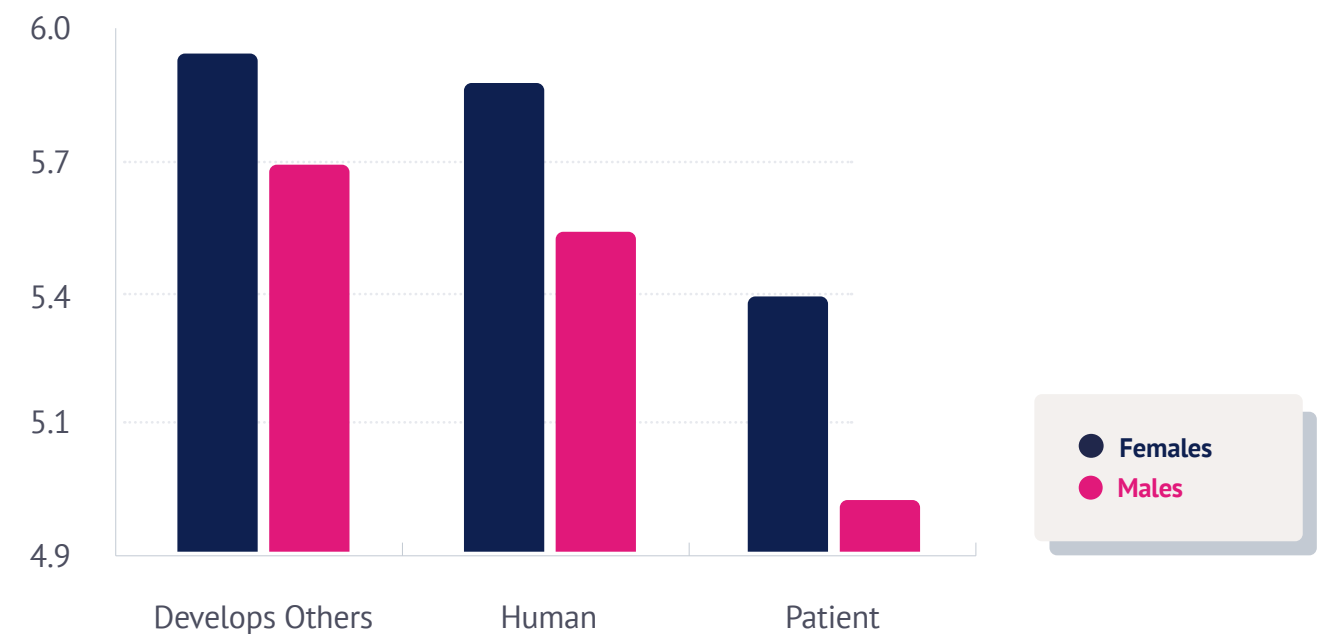# Female and male views of good leadership

Figure 4: Significant differences in feature centrality according to gender (scale from 1 to 7)

Our research showed a high degree of consensus between male and female participants in their view of good leadership.

There was alignment in the centrality assessment of 81 out of 84 qualities, including no significant difference when it came to qualities such as empathy, listening, supportive, approachable, inclusive and being a team-player. See figure 4 for the qualities that were significantly different.

A challenge for universities: Those with higher education place lower importance on leadership that is caring, friendly, helpful, and kind

The ambition to educate a new generation of leaders is widely stated in the mission statements of business schools and universities in the UK and around the world. The prevalence of global challenges such as those identified in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals means that this educational aspiration is welcome. We need a new generation who will exercise courageous moral leadership in communities and organisations across all sectors of society. However, the results of our survey raise questions regarding the idea of good leadership that exists among university graduates. We compared responses by educational level and found that there were significant correlations for four features: the more formal education respondents had received, the less they valued leaders being caring, friendly, helpful, and kind.

Insofar as leadership prototypes translate into leadership practice, these results highlight the importance of universities making intentional efforts to cultivate a broad range of graduate attributes.

The 2020 report, *Character Education in Universities: A Framework for Flourishing*, makes the case for character in higher education and provides an actionable framework for universities to prioritise the development of character together with advanced subject knowledge and technical skills.[13]
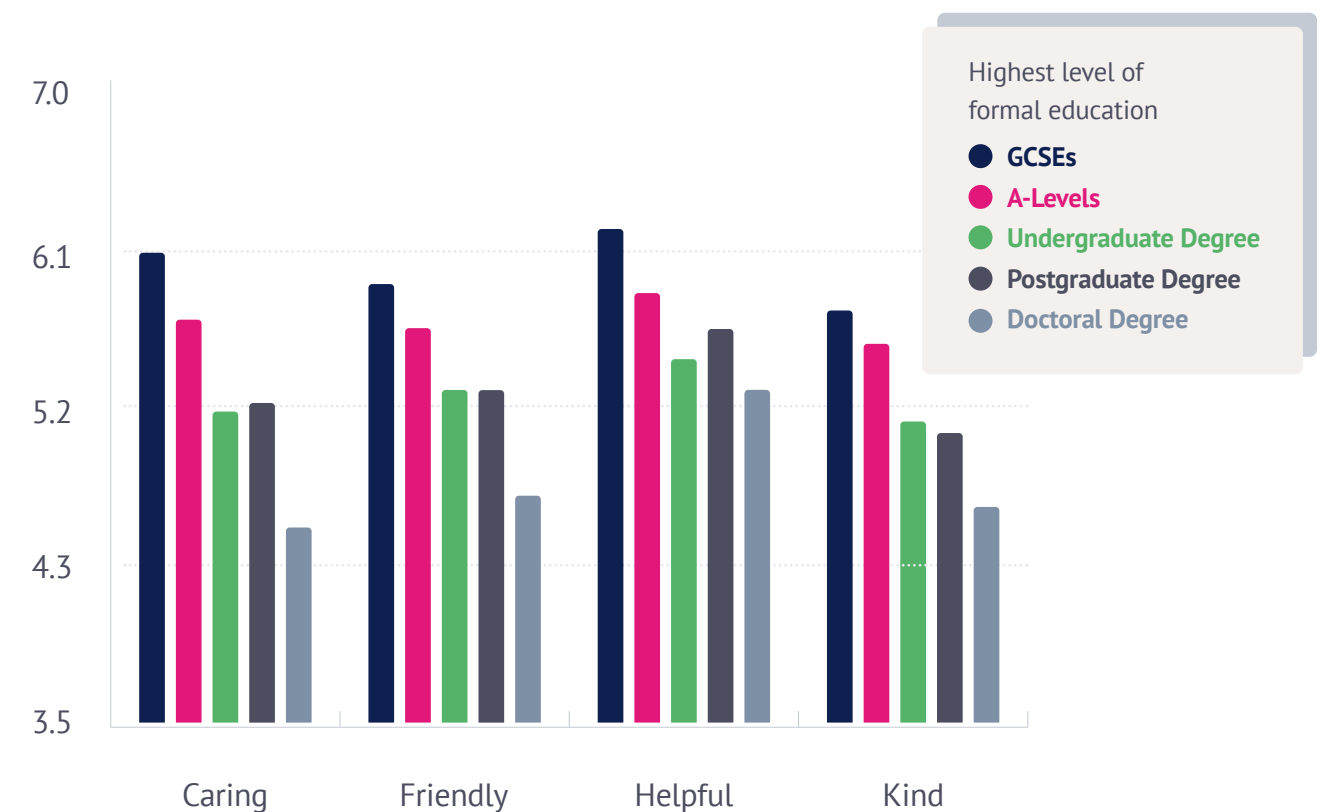

Highest level of formal education

- ● GCSEs
- ● A-Levels
- ● Undergraduate Degree
- ● Postgraduate Degree
- ● Doctoral Degree

Figure 5: Significant differences in feature centrality according to educational level (scale from 1 to 7)

Generational perspectives:
Millennials and Gen Zs value attentive and knowledgeable leaders

According to the Deloitte Global 2023 survey, Millennials and members of Gen Z have clear views when it comes to leadership. They expect business leaders to play a leading role alongside politicians and advocates in addressing social issues, and they don't simply expect to follow, they want to lead— to be empowered to drive change within organisations from the outset of their careers.[14]

Our research suggests that when it comes to expectations of good leadership there is widespread consensus between generations across the vast majority of features. However, there are two particular ways in which Millennials and Gen Zs have elevated expectations compared to older Gen X colleagues who are often in leadership positions over them.

Millennials and Gen Zs particularly value leaders who are attentive and committed to mentoring, and who can provide answers to questions and solutions to problems.

On the other hand, appreciation of risk awareness as an aspect of good leadership increases steadily with age. Recognising these differing generational views of good leadership—and developing a strategy to address them—is important if organisations are to harness the potential that exists across their workforce and maintain high levels of engagement and retention.
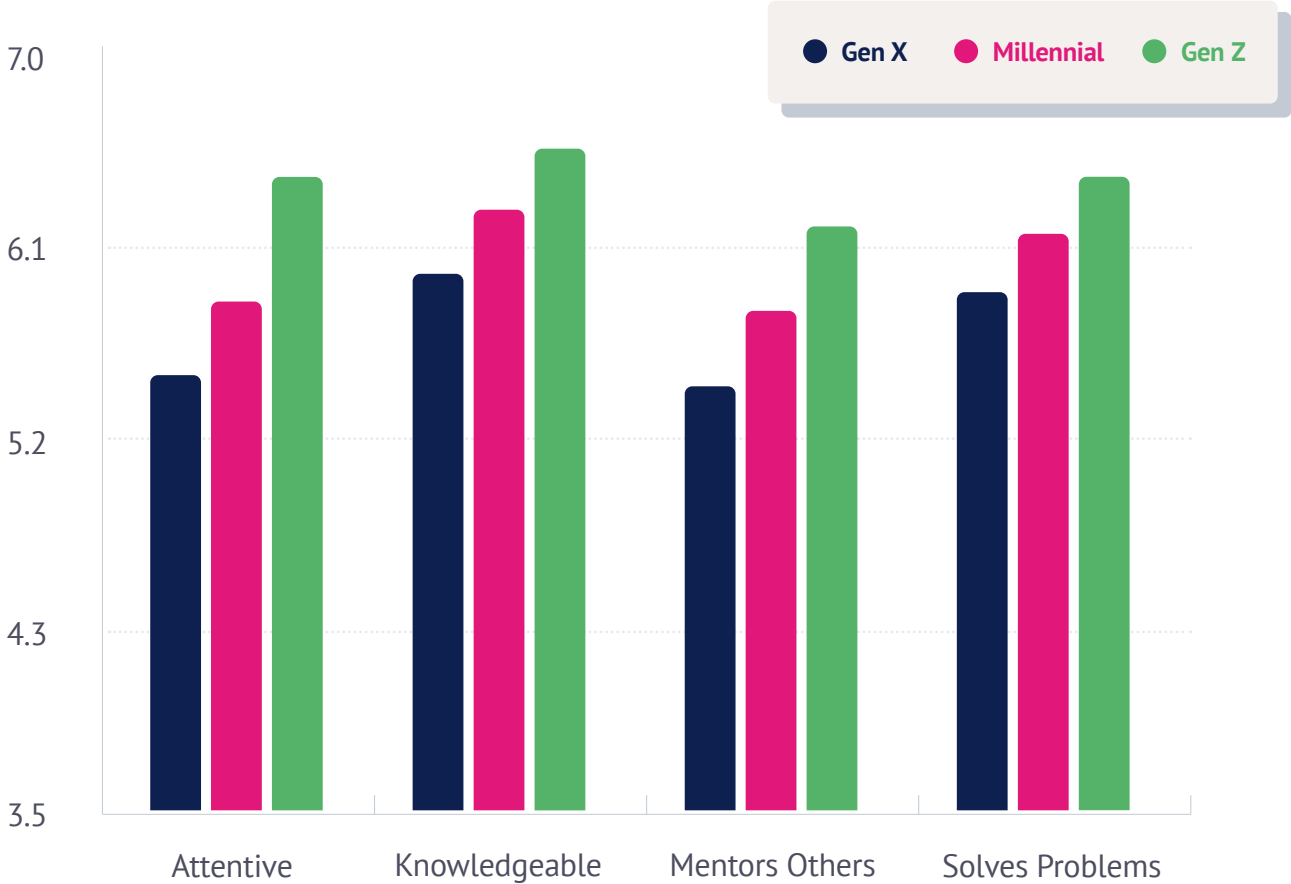

Figure 6: Significant differences in feature centrality according to generation (scale from 1 to 7)

Good leadership in finance, law, and technology

Comparing the top 15 features in each sector, there is a common core of basic professional competence: good leaders are expected to be competent, hardworking, and committed. Beyond these qualities distinct profiles are evident:

Finance

Risk awareness is the most central feature of good leadership according to professionals we surveyed the finance sector, featuring at the top of a list which includes integrity, responsibility, trustworthiness, and good judgement. These were found lacking in the analysis that followed in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and subsequent scandals and their identification may be aspirational. It may also reflect changes in culture and conduct that have taken place in the sector, driven within many firms and catalysed by the work of such organisations as the Financial Services Cultures Board and Financial Markets Standards Board. Comparing finance with other sectors, inclusivity is regarded as more central to good leadership, suggesting that efforts to promote greater diversity in the financial services industry may be taking root.

Law

Professional competence is a particular emphasis in the prototype of good leadership in the legal sector, comprising 40% of the top

20 most central features, compared to 25% in finance and 30% in tech. Character qualities of integrity, responsibility, and trustworthiness are also prized in the financial sector and speak to the reliability that is essential in professional services. The features that are considered most central to good leadership in law relate closely to what it means to be a good lawyer. However, a broader set of interpersonal skills and character qualities may be required for senior lawyers to lead their firms through the challenges and opportunities relating to new technologies, recruitment and retention, and employee wellbeing that are faced within the sector.

Technology

The prototype of good leadership identified within the tech sector highlights the importance of character. Amongst the most central features are determined, resilient, driven, and committed, pointing to a sector where new opportunities are there to be taken but not without difficulty. Pioneering, strategic, and visionary leadership is highly valued, and curiosity—the character quality that drives new understanding—is considered more important than in finance and law.

● **Character**   ● **Interpersonal skills**   ● **Professional competence**

Finance top 15

		Feature	Centrality				Feature	Centrality
●	1.	Risk aware	6.29		●	9.	Responsible	6.15
●	2.	Communication	6.24		●	10.	Professional	6.14
●	3.	Integrity	6.24		●	11.	Trustworthy	6.12
●	4.	Credibility	6.18		●	12.	Good judgement	6.11
●	5.	Resilient	6.18		●	13.	Hard working	6.11
●	6.	Confident	6.17		●	14.	Honesty	6.11
●	7.	Committed	6.15		●	15.	Takes action	6.11
●	8.	Competent	6.15					

Law top 15

		Feature	Centrality				Feature	Centrality
●	1.	Competent	6.45		●	9.	Builds relationships	6.29
●	2.	Professional	6.41		●	10.	Committed	6.25
●	3.	Hard working	6.40		●	11.	Solves problems	6.25
●	4.	Communication	6.36		●	12.	Trustworthy	6.25
●	5.	Integrity	6.35		●	13.	High standards	6.24
●	6.	Knowledgeable	6.33		●	14.	Experienced	6.23
●	7.	Responsible	6.32		●	15.	Takes ownership	6.23
●	8.	Expertise	6.31					

Tech top 15

		Feature	Centrality				Feature	Centrality
●	1.	Determined	6.25		●	9.	Problem solver	6.11
●	2.	Strategic	6.23		●	10.	Recognises others	6.08
●	3.	Competent	6.22		●	11.	Clarity of vision	6.08
●	4.	Takes ownership	6.22		●	12.	Resilient	6.08
●	5.	Forward thinking	6.17		●	13.	Action oriented	6.06
●	6.	Driven	6.16		●	14.	Confident	6.05
●	7.	Hard working	6.16		●	15.	Results focused	6.03
●	8.	Committed	6.13					

Table 2: Features of good leadership identified by professionals in UK financial, legal, and technology sectors, ranked according to mean centrality (scale from 1 to 7).
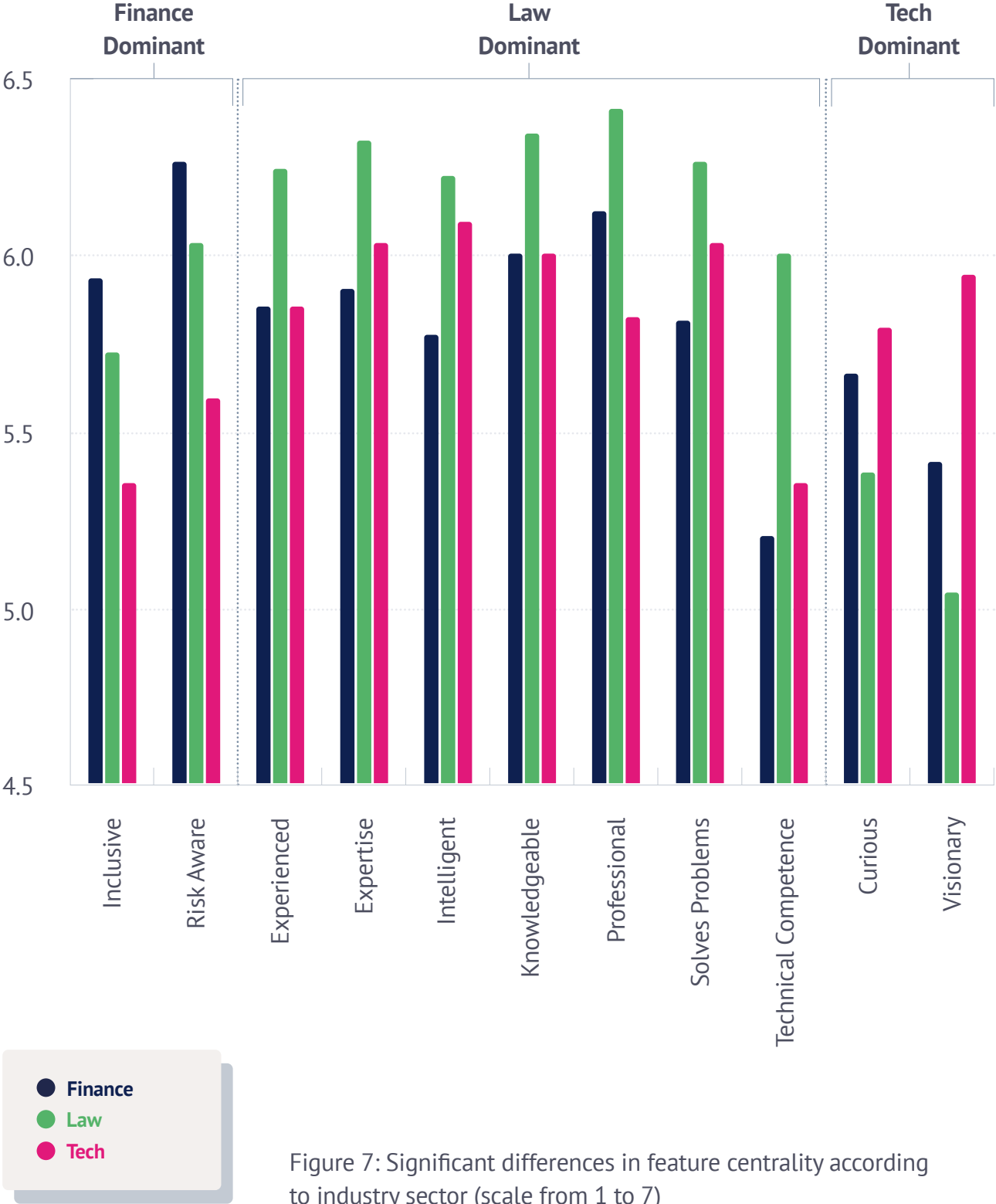
Figure 7: Significant differences in feature centrality according to industry sector (scale from 1 to 7)

Legend:
- Finance
- Law
- Tech

Paul Polman
The Future of Leadership roundtable,
co-sponsored by the Oxford Character Project
and the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship.
Saïd Business School, February 2023

Cultivating good leadership: Competence plus character

Leadership is often spoken of as combining two aspects: competence and character. According to Mark Carney, former governor of the Bank of England, it is the latter ("who leaders are") that "most determines a leader's effectiveness."[15] Harvard Business School, like many institutions of its kind, seeks to "educate leaders who make a difference in the world." It defines leadership in terms of competence plus character.

"When we talk about leaders, we mean people who embody a certain type of competence and character—both the competence that comes from the general manager's perspective the School cultivates and the character to understand the difference between being self-interested and self-centred... It involves recognizing that you are a true leader only when you have earned the trust of others, and when others, whether in your organizations or your communities, recognize you as such."

– Harvard Business School, Our Mission[16]

Our research identifies the features that people within UK business recognize as most central to good leadership. It supports the assertion that leadership is about both competence and character and also highlights interpersonal skills as an important area of focus.

What does this mean for leaders and those involved in leadership development?

1. Leaders must balance opposites and cultivate practical wisdom

Much discussion of leadership identifies one important aspect, style, or approach and argues for its particular importance. The instinct to limit one's focus in order to gain clarity is understandable but such approaches can obscure the complexity that is present in the lived experience of leading and can result in prescriptions that are hard to apply in practice. Our research identified 84 features of good leadership, all of which are important, and research in specific sectors identified more. Furthermore, some of the features of good leadership appear to push in opposite directions.

Decisiveness is a feature of good leadership, but so is adaptable, responsive, and flexible. Good leadership is driven and yet also approachable and calm; it is direct and challenging as well as caring and compassionate; it is about being open-minded and also involves having a clear vision. Leaders need to resist the rush to resolution when it comes to these kinds of tensions. Some aspects are more central overall but often the centrality is relative to the setting in a particular sector, firm, or situation. For leadership to be effective, the development and deployment of competence, character, and interpersonal skills must be appropriate for the context—this requires practical wisdom.

Leaders can develop the art of good judgement by paying close attention to their context and gaining an awareness of the range of approaches that can be applied in any given situation. An intentional practice of reflection on experience is important for leaders to continue to learn and grow.

2. Recognise the power of the leadership prototype

Our research found differences in the protype of good leadership in different sectors. The prototype of good leadership in any given context may or may not accord with a particular leadership theory but its importance is present in the way it shapes people's expectations and behaviours. Leaders may be able to shift the prototype over time by modelling and communicating a new

approach, but it is only possible to build the future by standing in the present. Leaders need to understand the expectations that exist when it comes to good leadership, reflect on aspects of leadership they may need to work on, and consider how they can shape ideas of leadership in a positive direction.

3. Adopt practices as well as principles

Many firms and professional organisations offer leadership frameworks that seek to make sense of the complex work of leading by identifying principles and associated competencies of good leadership in a particular company or sector. Such frameworks are helpful in bringing structure but need to be supplemented in order to develop character, which is cultivated like a muscle through habits and practices which shape patterns of thought, feeling, and action over time.

A focus on character may need a broader range of approaches in the leadership development playbook, including personal reflection, deep reading, discussion, adopting new habits, intentionally learning from role models, and setting personal reminders.[17]

Technical methodology

Method

To explore understandings of 'good leadership' in UK business, we utilised a method known as prototype analysis. This method is based on prototype theory which defines concepts in terms of common features held by most examples of the concept.[18]

Our research was conducted in three sectors (finance, law, and tech) with results aggregated to give an overall picture of good leadership in UK business. We followed a two-study format:

Study 1: Participants were invited to list features of 'good leadership' in their business sector. Features listed by participants were grouped independently by two researchers. Features were grouped linguistically (e.g. empathetic and empathy were grouped together) and semantically (e.g. genuine and authentic were grouped together). Discrepancies were adjudicated by a third researcher to establish an agreed list of features.

Study 2: Features derived from Study 1 were presented to a new group of participants who rated their centrality on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = almost never true, 7 = almost always true), enabling us to produce averaged centrality scores for each feature.

In finance and legal sectors, a third group of participants completed a series of memory and reaction time tasks to test the reliability of the distinction between central and peripheral features of good leadership in their sector. In both cases this additional test indicated the presence of a stable prototype.

Research ethics

This research was conducted under the ethical oversight and prior approval of the Central University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in this research.

Participants who took part in the Good leadership survey

	Study 1	Study 2
Number of participants	471 participants from 13 firms (finance = 204, law = 129, tech = 138)	687 participants from 31 firms (finance = 354, law = 237, tech = 96)
Age	21 – 66 years (M = 42.48, SD = 9.69)	22 – 65 years (M = 43.95, SD = 8.84)
Gender	55.4% female, 43.5% male, 1.1% non-binary or not disclosed	58.1% female, 40.3% male, 1.6% non-binary or not disclosed
Leadership level	13% manager of managers, 30.4% managers, 56.1% no direct reports	16.2% managers of managers, 35.7% managers, 48.2% no direct reports
Managed by	36.5% managed by a female, 60.3% managed by a male	37.1% managed by a female, 57.2% managed by a male
Ethnicity	80.5% white, 2.5% Black, 7.9% Asian, 4.2% mixed, 4.9% other or not stated	82.4% white, 7.1% Asian, 2.5% Black, 3.9% mixed, 4.1% other or not stated
Education level (highest achieved)	9.3% GCSEs or equivalent, 14.9% A-levels or equivalent, 34.2% undergraduate degree, 33.1% postgraduate degree, 7.6% doctoral degree	7% GCSEs or equivalent, 15% A-levels or equivalent, 41% undergraduate degree, 35.4% postgraduate degree, 1.6% doctoral degree

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