



Trend Research

Lessons for Leaders from the People Who Matter

How Employees Around the World View Their Leaders

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Simon Mitchell*



In these days of economic uncertainty, increasing competition, globalization, skills shortages, and shortening business cycles, being a leader has never been more challenging. But a simple constant remains—leadership effectiveness is ultimately determined by those who are led.

The Talent Management Expert



An inventory of changes in global workplaces over the past few decades would yield a long list of factors that are not as they once were.

*Innovative technologies, new business tools, greater diversity, more complex working environments, increasing business ambiguity, shifting demographics ... the list goes on. Not least among these is an increasing recognition of the importance of employee engagement to organizational success. But the fact is that the modern workplace—whether it's a production facility, a laboratory, a hospital, or an office park populated by cubicle-dwelling knowledge workers—still resembles the workplace of the past in one important regard: the hierarchy of **leader and employee**.*



Bosses are still bosses, employees are still employees.

Employees are ultimately the best measure of their leader's effectiveness. What's important is not just how productive employees are, it's also how engaged they are; it's how motivated, and how fulfilled. It's also how they are impacting on team morale, and how long they choose to remain in their jobs. Leaders have tremendous influence over these variables.

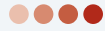
In multiple studies, including DDI's 2011 Global Leadership Forecast, leaders are, by their own admission, falling short. This isn't a new development. Over a period of many years, leaders have consistently given low marks to the quality of leadership in their organization. What's more, despite all of the effort and investment in leadership development—innovative new modalities, up-to-date content, business simulations, acceleration pools, 70/20/10 approaches, better diagnosis of strengths and areas for development—widespread improvement in leadership effectiveness remains elusive.

To better understand why leadership quality continues to be rated stubbornly low, we decided to take a deeper look by going straight to the source. We wanted to get at the root of the problem and find out what it is that's wrong. Is leadership quality linked to the complex world of business today or something more basic? Partnering with Harris Interactive, we asked 1,279 workers* around the world to tell us about their everyday interactions with their leaders; what their leaders are doing right and what they are doing wrong. It didn't take us long to discover that many leaders are doing plenty of things wrong—and *it starts with the basics*.

This matters because leadership matters. When leaders are of higher quality and are more effective, employees are more productive.

**For the purposes of this study, workers around the world refer to those age 18+ who identified their position as either entry level, administrative, clerical, professional, or technical staff from the U.S., U.K., Australia, Canada, China, Germany, India, and South East Asia (Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore) who work full-time.*

THE FINDINGS



FINDING #1: “I’m not saying my boss is bad but...”

Workers aren’t confident in their bosses’ skills. One in three simply don’t consider their boss to be effective.

Not everyone likes their boss and, in all fairness, they don’t have to; leaders don’t get paid to be liked. They get paid to *lead*—to get things done and, in the process, build strong relationships with their team members and other stakeholders.

One important intangible of the manager/employee relationship is the level of respect employees have for their leaders—the belief that their boss is a skilled leader worthy of respect and loyalty. Our survey revealed that this is an area where leaders not only fall short—they fall *a long way short*. One in three respondents (34 percent) said they don’t consider their manager to be effective at his or her job.*

By any definition, a competent leader must be able to motivate employees to give their best effort and do their best work. But again, more than one-third of employees say their leaders are deficient in this category, as well. When asked if they feel motivated to give their best to their leader, 37 percent said only sometimes or never.

Predictably, this dim view of leader capability contributes to turnover. Two out of every five employees (39 percent) surveyed said they have left a job primarily because of their leader, while a similar number (55 percent) said they have considered leaving a job because of their leader.

Clearly, when bosses don’t inspire confidence or positively impact engagement, employees are more likely to keep an eye open, if not a foot out of the door, for a better opportunity. When such an opportunity comes along, they are likely to jump at it.

34%*

of respondents said they don’t consider their manager to be effective at his or her job.

*34 percent of respondents responded only sometimes or never when asked if they consider their leader to be effective.



“I CAN DO WHAT YOU DO... ONLY BETTER!”

Nearly half of respondents think they could do their boss' job, only better. Does this suggest that many team members are ready to take on more responsibility and that they should be targeted to replace the current crop of leaders? Not necessarily. While only about half (45 percent) of employees think they could be more effective than their boss, about half again (46 percent) would actually want their boss' job! Leadership is not easy and this reluctance to become a leader might say more about the considerable challenges facing leaders than employees' desire to make a telling contribution.

Interestingly, among the survey respondents more men than women felt they could be a more effective leader than their current boss (53 percent versus 34 percent, respectively). This may be attributable to men being more confident in their abilities rather than suggesting that men are more effective leaders, however. Assessment data that DDI has gathered over many years on leaders of both sexes show few differences in terms of performance between men and women.

What some of the respondents had to say:

- “Far too much stress. Being expected to produce more and more results with fewer and fewer resources (people, supplies, etc.).”
- “Some of my coworkers are hard to work with. I would not want to manage them.”
- “It involves many aspects of running this business that I am not interested in. I think his job would be terribly boring and, frankly, I find that quite off-putting.”
- “Not worth the stress.”
- “I don't want that much responsibility. I like my 8-5 job.”



FINDING #2: “My boss does more harm than good.”

Instead of motivating employees, workers often feel hurt and demotivated by their boss’ actions.

In the workplace, things inevitably go wrong. People who work side-by-side every day don’t always get along. Issues arise. Egos collide. Some see their careers move forward while others always seem to be in the boss’ doghouse. Teams are somewhat like families: they need to coexist in an environment marked by differing motivations and constantly shifting dynamics. Unfortunately, work needs to get done whether everyone gets along or not. It’s the leader’s job to keep things on an even keel and address the occasional (sometimes frequent) conflicts, hurt feelings, and personality clashes.

It’s a tough job that many leaders do well. But on the other hand it seems a great many don’t. When asked if their leader handles workplace conflict effectively, 42 percent of employees surveyed for our study responded either only sometimes or never. Similarly, 35 percent responded only sometimes or never when asked if their leaders listen to their work-related concerns. This is important, of course, because listening has to be the first step in addressing any problem.

Additionally, according to the survey, only about half of bosses (54 percent*) involve employees in making decisions that affect the employee’s own, or the employee’s team’s, work. Those decisions are made without much explanation, either: 43 percent of employees say that their bosses rarely, if ever, explain the rationale for their decisions. As one respondent from Canada said of a previous boss: “[He] constantly took unilateral decisions without proper buy-in from work units, employees, or staff. This caused a great deal of labor unrest with quite a few senior administrators and directors leaving.”

Also troubling is that so many bosses (34 percent) are cited for most of the time or always singling out certain employees as their favorites—a practice that poisons morale, sabotages team effectiveness, and discourages those who aren’t the boss’ favorites from putting forth their best effort. Another employee from Canada told us about a past boss who provided a perfect example of this: “He gave out extra work shifts due to favoritism.”

*54 percent responded most of the time or always when asked if their manager involves them in making decisions that affect their work or their team’s work.

35%

responded only sometimes or never when asked if their leaders listen to their work-related concerns.



FINDING #3: “My boss is human. At least I think so.”

Leaders are lacking in fundamental leadership skills.

That so many leaders are ineffective at motivating and engaging their people indicates that they are failing badly in their day-to-day interactions with team members.

While employees aren’t looking for their boss to be their friend, they do expect courtesy, respect, honesty, and tact in their interactions—and rightly so. But too many leaders aren’t delivering on these basic requirements of a healthy manager/employee relationship. We looked at some of the elements of what can be described as fundamental essentials of good leadership, starting with employee self-esteem. The findings were scary. Only 40 percent of workers reported that their boss never damages their self-esteem, leaving a majority (60 percent) of respondents who reported that their boss at least sometimes damages their self-esteem. Men were twice as likely as women (32 percent versus 17 percent, respectively) to say their leader’s actions damage their self-esteem. All of us, whether we are leaders or employees, go to work to do a good job. In light of this fact, that employees feel that their leader’s actions damage their self-confidence and, by extension, also negatively impact areas such as customer service, innovation, and meeting challenging goals, is very worrying.

Well over two-thirds (70 percent*) said that their boss doesn’t remain calm and constructive when discussing a problem, suggesting that employees are more likely to withhold problems or issues from their bosses and less likely to engage them in difficult discussions.

It’s little wonder then that employees would rather catch a cold, pay their taxes, or receive a speeding ticket than have a difficult discussion with their boss (Figure 1).


**70 percent responded all of the time or most of the time when asked if their manager remains calm and constructive when discussing a problem.*

Only 40%
of workers reported
that their boss
never damages their
self-esteem.

FIGURE 1: WHAT EMPLOYEES DREAD THE MOST

Percent responding yes

A difficult conversation with boss	20.4%								
Returning to work after a vacation	16.6%								
Receiving a speeding or parking ticket	11.5%								
Having a cold	11.2%								
Formal performance discussion	9.9%								
Paying taxes	9.0%								
A bad hangover	8.2%								
Doing housework	6.9%								
Getting a credit card bill	6.4%								



Employees also dread those interactions that don't necessarily have to be negative, such as a performance discussion. In fact, employees would presumably rather suffer through a bad hangover, do housework, or see their credit card bill arrive in the mail than face the prospect of sitting through a discussion with the boss about their job performance. And this simply isn't good enough. Leaders, at the very least, should be effective at conducting required performance discussions, however uncomfortable they may be. Leaders do carry the responsibility for managing their direct reports' performance, after all.

Why are so many bosses failing so badly in this area? DDI has conducted research and worked with leading organizations around the world for more than 40 years, during which time we have developed a deep understanding of what makes leaders effective. We have found that one of the most important and defining traits of an effective leader, at any organizational level, is his or her consistent use of what we refer to as Interaction EssentialsSM. Interaction EssentialsSM are those behaviors that enable a leader to address both the personal and practical needs of the individuals with whom he or she is interacting, whether it's a formal discussion (e.g., a performance review), or an informal discussion such as a coaching situation. The Interaction EssentialsSM skills that meet personal needs include those related to listening, empathy, and knowing how to best involve and support others. Practical needs, meanwhile, are met through the consistent use of an interaction process that makes sure that the tasks at hand are achieved with the maximum efficiency.

We asked employees about leaders' use of the Interaction Essentials. Their responses point to many of the deficiencies that leaders have in critical leadership skill areas. Consistent use of the Interaction Essentials is key to leader effectiveness, and given the very high proportion of employees feeling that their leader only sometimes or never uses these essentials, it is no wonder employees often feel that their leader is doing more harm than good.

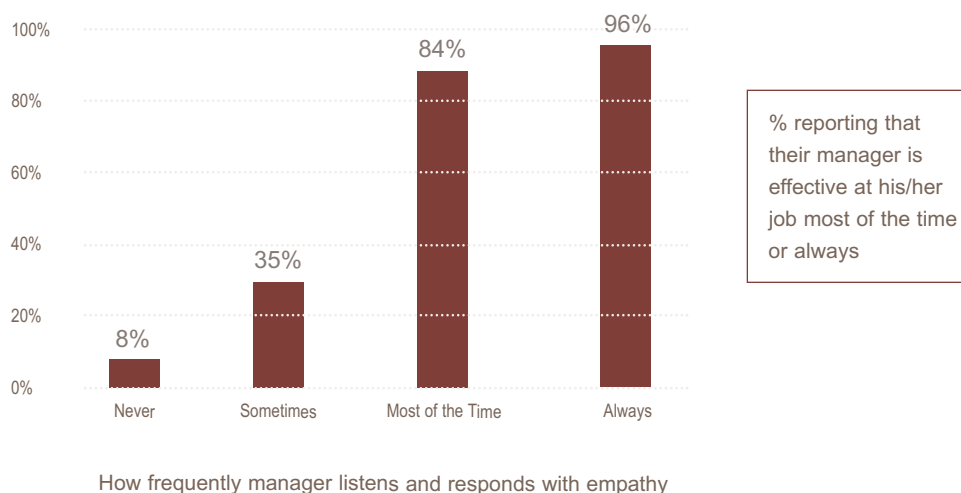
FIGURE 2: LEADERS' USE OF INTERACTION ESSENTIALS

QUESTIONS	Most of the Time or Always	Only Sometimes or Never
1. Does your manager ask for your ideas about how to solve problems?	51%	49%
2. Does your manager help you solve problems without solving them for you?	53%	47%
3. Does your manager give you sufficient feedback on your performance?	55%	45%
4. In conversation, does your manager ask questions to ensure he/she understands what you are saying?	59%	41%
5. Does your manager adequately recognize your efforts/contributions?	60%	40%
6. Does your manager handle work conversations efficiently?	64%	36%

Leaders should strive for
100%
consistent use of the
Interaction Essentials.
When they do good
things happen.

These skills aren't called essential for no reason. Leaders should strive for 100 percent consistent use of these Interaction Essentials. When they do, good things happen—and consistent use brings maximum results. Employees of leaders who focus on the Interaction Essentials consider their leaders more effective, are more motivated, and are more likely to be productive. Empathy is particularly important when it comes to perceptions of effectiveness, worker motivation, and productivity (Figure 3), as leaders who display genuine empathy are seen as placing a higher value on their employees and their workplace contributions.

FIGURE 3: LISTENING AND RESPONDING WITH EMPATHY AND PERCEIVED LEADER EFFECTIVENESS.



Employees stated
clearly they are

NOT

looking for their
leader to be a friend.



FINDING #4: “My current boss just can’t compare with my best-ever boss.”

The difference between employee performance under their current leader and their best-ever leader is significant and demands attention.

Employees’ perceptions and judgment about their current boss aren’t shaped only by their current boss’ actions or behaviors. They’re also influenced by how employees feel about bosses they’ve worked for in the past. With workers today more likely than ever to switch jobs frequently, regardless of their job level, the typical individual will report to many different leaders over the course of a career. One of the results of this “leadership churn” is that it gives employees a broader perspective when it comes to drawing conclusions about the quality of their current boss; they can draw comparisons between their current boss and those bosses, good and bad, who they’ve worked for in the past; they know what works and what doesn’t.

Recognizing that there were lessons to be learned from the past bosses, we asked employees to compare their current boss with the individual they would identify as their best-ever leader. We asked a simple but powerful question: “*Thinking about the best manager you ever had, what did he/she do that made them the best?*”

Respondents consistently told us that what set their best-ever leader apart was a propensity for recognition and for providing the right degree of support without stepping in and taking over. They also said that their best-ever leader was adept at involving team members when making decisions (Figure 4).

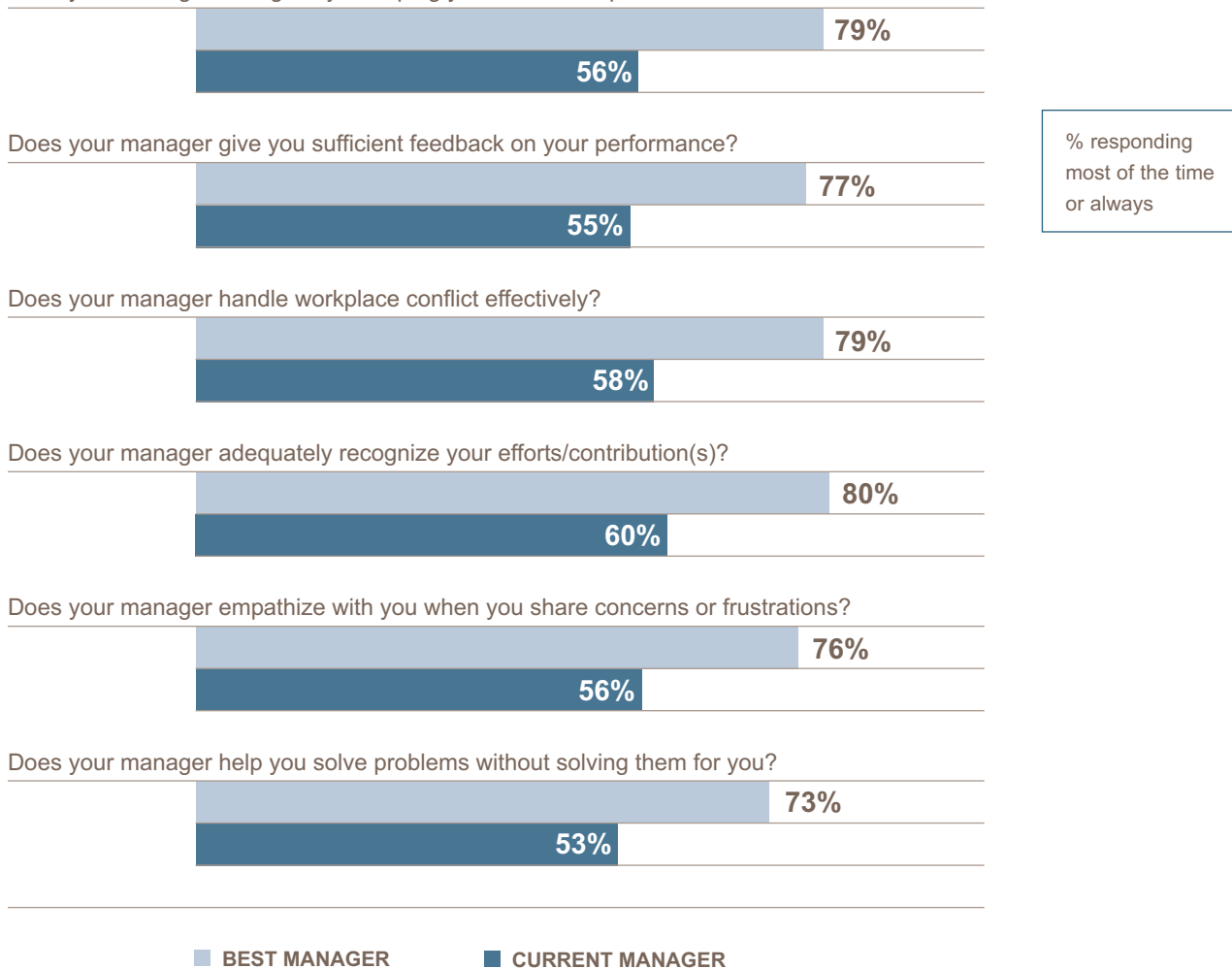
FIGURE 4: WHAT BEST LEADERS DO THAT MAKE THEM THE BEST

(top mentions in descending order)

- ① Recognized me appropriately
- ② Supported me without taking over
- ③ Involved me in decisions
- ④ Listened to me
- ⑤ Took time to explain rationale for decisions
- ⑥ Took care to maintain my self-esteem

Perhaps not surprisingly, employees stated clearly they are not looking for their leader to be a friend: “Took time to socialize with me” and “Asked about my hobbies and interests” came at the bottom of the list of behaviors that set best-ever leaders apart. Comparing current bosses with employees’ best-ever bosses provides an interesting way to explore whether bosses are getting better or worse. In other words, if a majority of employees felt that their current boss is the best they’ve ever had, then what a great validation that the quality of leadership has improved over time! Unfortunately, the responses to our survey show that this isn’t the case (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: HOW EMPLOYEES COMPARE THEIR CURRENT BOSS TO THEIR BEST-EVER LEADER.
Does your manager do a good job helping you to be more productive?



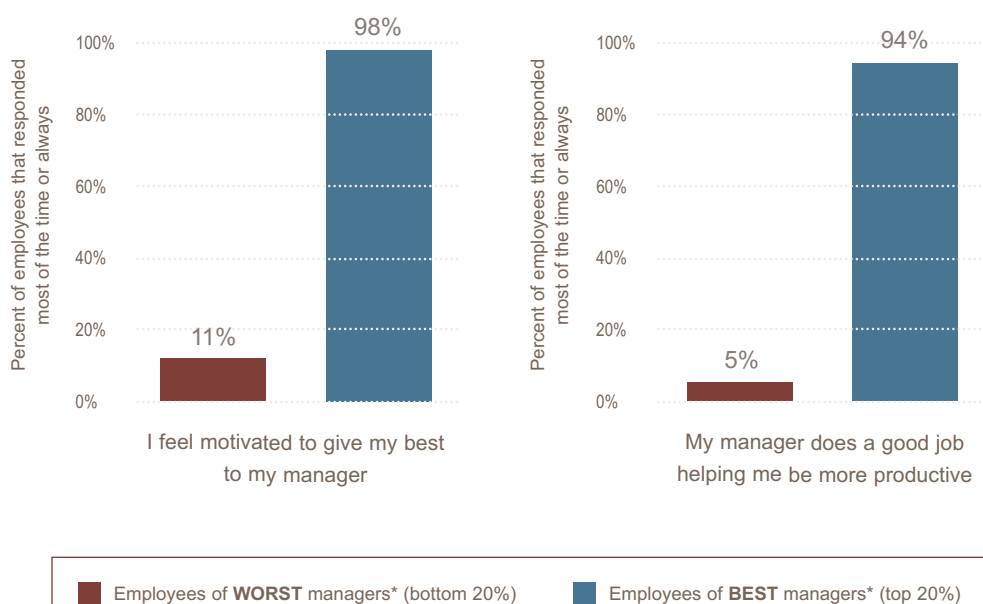
Only 56%
of employees reported
that their current
leader helps them be
more productive.

As the survey results reveal, there are significant gaps in performance between current and best-ever leaders. The best leaders are consistent and demonstrate positive leadership behaviors and, as the research demonstrates, employees respond by being more motivated.

The biggest gap in performance between employees' current leaders and their best-ever leaders is in helping employees be more productive. Only 56 percent of employees reported that their current leader helps them be more productive, whereas 79 percent of workers reported that their best-ever leader helped them be more productive.

But what about productivity? When we asked employees to compare their level of job motivation and productivity when working for their best-ever as opposed to their worst leader, the difference (Figure 6) was staggering!

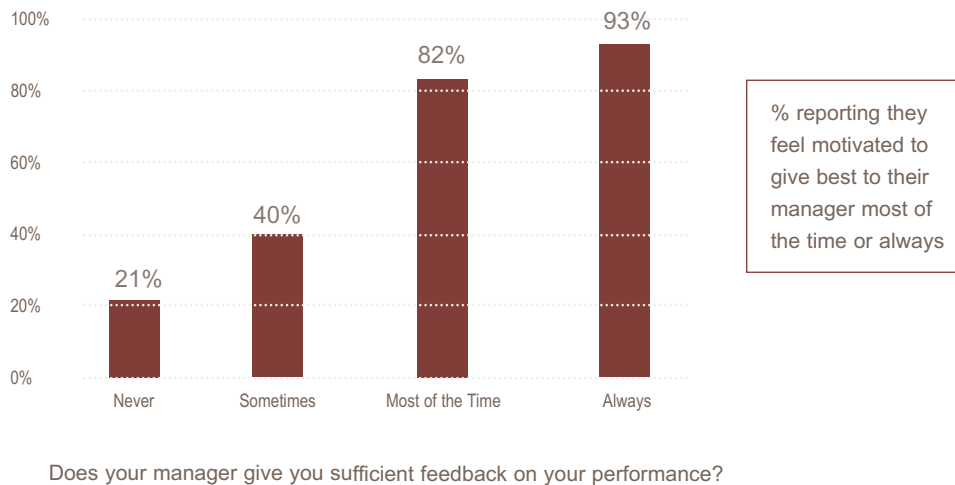
FIGURE 6: THE IMPACT OF LEADER QUALITY ON JOB MOTIVATION AND PRODUCTIVITY.



*Best/Worst managers based upon employee perception.

In addition, we found that employees who said their leaders provided sufficient feedback were more likely to be motivated to do a good job (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROVIDING FEEDBACK AND EMPLOYEES FEELING MOTIVATED.



FINDING #5: “My boss isn’t necessarily bad at *everything*.”

There are certain areas where bosses actually are rated highly by employees.

While across the board many employees rated their bosses as deficient, there were a handful of areas where a clear majority of employees gave their bosses high marks. One of these areas was setting clear expectations. When asked if they understand their leader’s expectations of them, nearly three out of four employees (74 percent) responded most of the time or always.

Another area in which leaders scored relatively highly was in providing the support that employees feel they need in order to be successful. Sixty-six percent of respondents said most of the time or always when asked if their leader provides necessary support. This suggests that while some leaders are seen as barriers when it comes to employees getting work done and benefiting from a positive work environment, most do what is necessary to remove obstacles and clear a path to success.

Of course, the ratings in both of these categories could be much higher. There’s still a significant gap between current and best-ever leaders, and there is plenty of room for improvement; but given the many responsibilities and competing demands that comprise a leader’s role, it’s worth pointing out that the majority of leaders have clear strengths on which they can build and develop for the future. Understanding where bosses need to focus their development efforts and identifying the strengths they need to further develop is a key element in improving performance.



FINDING #6: “Why do I even need a leader at all?”

Does leadership quality make much of a difference?

The question of whether or not leadership quality matters may seem facile, or even rhetorical. But is it?

As part of previous research DDI had conducted in 2011, we asked 200 Wall Street and City of London analysts whether leadership actually made a difference in their rating of the share price of a company. “Of course!” they said. That might seem to settle the issue. But when we asked them to clarify what they meant by leadership, almost all said “the CEO.” Not all did, however. Some of the analysts also pointed to the quality of leadership at lower levels of the organization, where the primary day-to-day activities that define a leadership role (getting things done and building relationships) supersede senior management imperatives, such as formulating business strategy and ensuring returns for stockholders.

Following these more-enlightened analysts’ lead, in considering the relative quality and effectiveness of leadership, we believe it makes sense to consider the degree to which leaders actually matter. Do better leaders drive better results? Does a better boss make an individual employee a more productive, effective worker?

An important data point related to this question comes from our Global Leadership Forecast 2011, which found that organizations with better-quality leaders do in fact outperform their competition when it comes to a whole host of measures, including financial performance. The responses to our employee survey provide additional evidence.

Effective Leaders Improve Performance

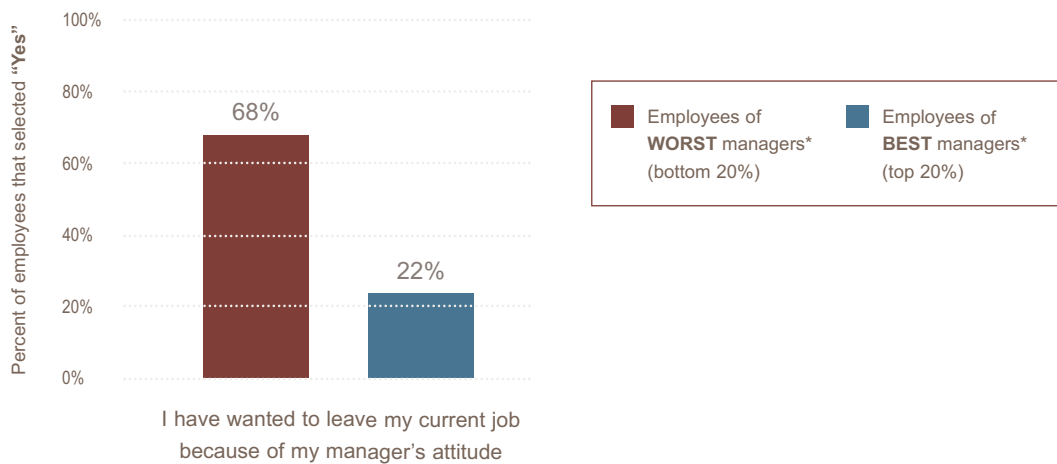
One obvious way leaders affect organizational performance is by driving team productivity. Of course, better leaders should equate to increased productivity, but by how much? When asked, those not currently working for the best manager they ever worked for, the majority (53 percent) of respondents estimated they would be 20 to 60 percent more productive working for their best-ever leader. A quarter (26 percent) felt that they’d be anywhere from 41 to 60 percent more productive if they could go back and be managed by their best-ever leader. Another way to put this is that for every two to three people being managed by their best-ever manager, there would be a productivity gain equal to a whole extra person. Stop now and reread this section. Anyone running a team, department, or enterprise should sit up and take notice of these findings—and the costs that they imply!

*The majority of
respondents estimated
they would be
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for their best-ever leader.*

What About Employee Turnover?

One factor that good leadership has been repeatedly proven to directly impact is employee turnover, and this survey bears this out. Out of every 10 respondents, four (39 percent) said they had left a job primarily because of their leader at the time. Even if they didn't act on their desire to leave, 55 percent of employees said they have considered leaving a job because of their leader. Those who said they currently work for their best-ever leader were three times less likely to leave their job because of their leader's attitude. Given the losses in productivity, and the recruitment, search, training, and other costs associated with bringing a new hire on board, it might be better—and cheaper—to focus more attention on why people are leaving (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8: HOW LEADER QUALITY DRIVES EMPLOYEE TURNOVER.



**Best/Worst managers based upon employee perception.*



IMPLICATIONS

As we have seen to this point, there were numerous insights that emerged from our global survey of employees. But what are the implications of the findings? What is it that these employees told us that is especially important for organizations—and their HR and OD professionals—to focus on? We believe that the following are the most important take-aways:



Leaders need to know their blind spots. While this survey showed that employees viewed their leaders as ineffective and lacking in basic leadership skills, we are left to question whether or not leaders themselves recognize their shortcomings. As we mentioned earlier, in DDI's 2011 Global Leadership Forecast study leaders gave low ratings to the quality of leadership in their organization. Yet, in our 2010 frontline leaders study, *Finding the First Rung*, when we asked leaders to rate their own overall leadership skills, the vast majority—87 percent—rated themselves as good or excellent.

How do we explain this? It would appear to us that the issue is one of leaders not acknowledging their leadership “blind spots”; they see deficiencies in other leaders, but not in themselves. The first step in addressing this tendency is the accurate diagnosis of leader strengths and development areas through assessment. DDI has recently introduced a new frontline leader assessment tool that uses realistic leadership situations to assess individual leaders against common leadership competencies. Data and insights attained from tools such as this can form the basis of highly targeted development plans that help leaders become more skilled and effective.



Leaders need to develop the skills required for effective leadership

conversations. If organizations want to improve the quality of their leaders, the most important focus area should be their leaders' ability to conduct effective conversations with their team members, peers, customers, and other key stakeholders. Effective conversations, whether they are team meetings, routine coaching situations, or formal performance review discussions, are the bread and butter of leadership, and they are what sets highly regarded leaders apart from the rest. To handle conversations effectively requires that leaders master the Interaction Essentials that we described earlier in this report. Among the Interaction Essentials skills are the ability to listen, empathize, involve, and support. Leaders also need to conduct and manage interactions to ensure that they achieve their intended outcomes.

Research by DDI and others has proved the importance of the Interaction Essentials to leader effectiveness. When leaders have developed them and use them every day on the job, team members boast gains in areas such as job satisfaction, self-esteem, positive work outcomes, and health and well-being.

The importance of the Interaction Essentials cannot be overstated, as leaders must first master them before they can learn to coach, influence others, build partnerships, and gain commitment.



There are no short cuts. The good news is that the Interaction Essentials are developable. Because the behaviors tied to these essentials support every other leadership competency, a comprehensive, competency-based leadership development curriculum is an excellent starting point. But courses are not enough. For the targeted behaviors to become an ingrained part of a leader's skill set, they need to be practiced in a safe, supportive environment. Additionally, the leader must engage in consistent, on-the-job application of the behaviors on an ongoing basis in order to become proficient. This all takes time, but it's the only way for a leader to develop into the skilled and effective boss that employees will respect and want to work for for the long haul.

DDI has a proven methodology for developing the essential skills all leaders need to be effective. To learn more about our approach, and more about why the Leadership Essentials matter, download *The Essential Guide to Interaction Essentials* at www.ddiworld.com/EssentialsGuide.

DDI's Global Workforce Study Research

This 15-minute survey was conducted online within the U.S., U.K., Australia, Canada, China, Germany, India, and South East Asia (Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore) by Harris Interactive® on behalf of Development Dimensions International among 1,279 full-time workers age 18+ who identified their position as either entry level, administrative, clerical, professional, or technical staff between August 31 and September 20, 2011 (percentages for some questions are based on a subset, based on their responses to certain questions).

DEMOGRAPHICS:

- > **Gender:** 57% male, 43% female.
- > **Geography:** United States: 22.8%, Germany: 12.8%, China: 12.5%, Canada: 11.8%, Australia: 11.4%, India: 10.3%, United Kingdom: 8.1%, Singapore: 4.5%, Malaysia: 3.0%, Philippines: 2.7%.
- > **Age:** 18-19: less than .5%, 20-24: 11%, 25-29: 22%, 30-34: 19%, 35-39: 11%, 40-44: 9%, 45-49: 8%, 50-54: 9%, 55-59: 6%, 60-64: 3%, 65 and over: 2%.
- > **Industry:** 15% Manufacturing; 11% Other; 9% Education; 8% Banking, Finance, and Insurance; 7% Health Care and Social Assistance; 5% Technology Services; 4% Engineering Services; 4% Other Services; 4% Public Administration/Government; 3% Administrative Support Services; 3% Business Services; 3% Construction; 3% Retail Trade; 3% Transportation and Warehousing; 2% Accommodation and Food Services; 2% Telecommunications; 2% Wholesale Trade; 1% Advertising/Marketing; 1% Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting; 1% Arts, Entertainment, Culture, and Recreation; 1% Automotive Services; 1% Communication; 1% Health and Community Services; 1% Legal Services; 1% Military; 1% Mining; 1% Pharmaceutical; 1% Property and Business Services; 1% Real Estate; 1% Religious/Non-Profit Organizations; 1% Research Services; 1% Utilities.



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Pete has more than 30 years' experience in the research, design, and delivery of training, selection, assessment, and development systems. He is a key DDI thought leader in management and leadership development, including the use of high-technology and internet platforms. He speaks frequently at conferences on topics related to leadership development and the integration of emerging technologies with learning and assessment systems.

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Simon is responsible for leading DDI's European marketing activity. His experience includes: the design and delivery of executive assessment, development interventions, and selection processes; high-potential identification and development; success profiling and competency analysis; and general leadership development and succession planning. He has co-authored a number of DDI publications including studies on leadership transition (*Stepping Up—Not Off*) and global sales perceptions (*Sales: Strategic Partnership or Necessary Evil?*).

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- Selection & Assessment
- Leadership & Workforce Development
- Succession Management
- Performance Management

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