



HUMAN SYSTEMS  
DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

## **Leadership as Fit: A tool to assess leadership capacity**

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Some leaders succeed where others fail.

Others succeed in one environment and fail miserably in another.

In even more perplexing cases, the same leader can be perfect for an organization one year and woefully incompetent the next.

If you see leadership as some absolute combination of skills and abilities, then these situations would seem to be impossible. On the other hand, if you understand the complex dynamics of human systems, you see effective leadership in terms of “fit.”

An effective leader must respond to the needs of staff, stockholders, environment, competitors, market forces, customer demands, and all other factors that collude in complicated ways to determine organizational and individual success.

Good leaders co-evolve with their environments. They are structured and demanding when the need arises, and they shift just as easily into free-wheeling exploration as conditions change. The key success factor is not absolute, it depends on the fit with the circumstances and the flexibility to shift when the circumstances shift.

Human systems dynamics helps you see and influence these complex patterns of co-evolutionary success. The Leadership as Fit tool reflects a particular leader’s preferences along a leadership continuum. The two ends of the continuum are described below.

**Traditional Leadership Perspective.** At one extreme, the leader focuses on prediction and control. This approach can provide many benefits for the organization, including:

- ▶ Control
- ▶ Accountability
- ▶ Stability
- ▶ Predictability
- ▶ Reliability
- ▶ Maintenance

Nothing is intractable.

**Complex Adaptive Leadership Perspective.** At the other extreme, the leader gives up control and explores open space of opportunity. This approach also has its benefits, including:

- ▶ Emergence
- ▶ Innovation
- ▶ Patterns
- ▶ Surprise
- ▶ Creativity
- ▶ Creative destruction

The following pages include questions to help a leader recognize where their leadership style fits along this continuum. But remember: Any part of the continuum can work for you or against you. Always make sure that :

- ▶ Your actions correspond with—fit—the environment in which you want to succeed. In the same way you wouldn't want a wild and crazy buddy to run a nuclear power plant, you also wouldn't expect a tight-laced colleague to flex and easily seize a new market opportunity
- ▶ You build the capacity to shift along the continuum. No organizational situation stays the same for long. As a leader you should be able to shift from more to less control when the environment demands it.

As you respond to the questions and consider your profile, think about where you are now, where you have been before, and how easy you find it to shift from one to the other. The final page of this packet provides tips to improve your leadership fit.

If you have questions about this tool or want more information about leadership as fit, contact [jwolter@hsdinstitute.org](mailto:jwolter@hsdinstitute.org).

If you would like to explore other human systems dynamics (HSD) tools and concepts, visit us at [www.hsdinstitute.org](http://www.hsdinstitute.org).

## Assess Your Capacity

Select the one or two best answers to each question below. If all choices are equally appealing, leave it blank. Darken the circle(s) to indicate which answer(s) you chose. When you complete all questions, count the number of a's, b's, c's, d's you selected. Record the numbers in the TOTALS columns and plot the cumulative total for each on the profile on page 7.

	a	b	c	d
1. When I work with my boss, I: a. Guarantee specific outcomes b. Shape expectations for outcomes c. Indicate what I expect as outcomes d. Acknowledge that the outcomes will emerge over the span of the project	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. When I begin a project I: a. Follow a clear step-by-step process b. Begin with a clear plan, but am willing to change over time c. Begin with a plan, but expect to change over time d. Plan a first step and plan subsequent steps as I collect more information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. My approaches to solving problems: a. Never vary b. Are standard, but I make customized changes c. Usually follow similar patterns d. Are designed to meet the unique needs of each client	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. I believe that I can predict the reaction of a client or employee: a. All the time b. Most of the time c. Sometimes d. Never	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. When I begin an initiative, I collect information from: a. Top management b. All management c. Key personnel in selected departments d. All levels across the organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	<b>a</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>c</b>	<b>d</b>
Total Page 1 (Questions 1 through 5)				

	a	b	c	d
6. Individuals in the organization should be valued for: a. Compliance with rules b. Honesty about sources of success and failure c. Increasing their level of competence d. Creating patterns	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. I prefer to begin an initiative: a. At the top of the organization b. With a key decision-maker c. Where there is the most need for change d. At any organizational level with any group	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. A team is empowered by: a. Strong leader b. Member interactions c. Alliances with others d. Autonomous individuals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. In effective organizations, decisions are based on: a. Individual preferences b. Team/unit consensus c. Team/unit rules d. Cumulative experience of individuals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. As a leader in my organization, I: a. Give expert advice on organizational change b. Hold a mirror up to help others see c. Share insights about patterns of behavior I see d. Learn and teach	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. An effective leader should be able to: a. Squeeze ambiguity out of a system b. Explain why there is ambiguity in the system c. Help people feel comfortable in ambiguous situations d. Use uncertainty and ambiguity to increase organizational capacity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. I collect information about the success of our performance: a. Only if someone else requires it b. At the end of a process as a final report c. At the beginning, middle, and end d. During every critical interaction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. When I observe patterns in my organization, I look for: a. Roles that individuals play b. Power relationships c. Personal interactions d. Patterns of behavior across the organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	<b>a</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>c</b>	<b>d</b>
Total Page 2 (Questions 6 through 13)				

	<b>a</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>c</b>	<b>d</b>
14. A major factor in increasing the speed of change in an organization is: a. Competitive energy b. Collaboration c. Mutual respect and trust d. Learning about the process of change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. When you are facilitating organizational change you should begin with: a. The task that is most critical to the top managers b. The simplest issues, so the group will build confidence over time c. Actions most likely to succeed d. The issues that are most accessible	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16. Organizational history is important because: a. It predicts the future b. It gives information about potential resistance c. It provides stories to use in encouraging change d. It builds the capacity for future action	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17. Differences in an organization: a. Distract from the focus of the work b. Provide variety in problem identification and solving processes c. Keep people engaged and interested d. Provide the impetus for transformation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
18. A highly functioning organization: a. Meets a set of pre-defined criteria b. Reflects the vision of its CEO c. Satisfies the needs of all of its internal and external stakeholders d. Fits into the niche formed by customers, competitors, and resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
19. Change in an organization is like: a. Tuning a machine b. Freezing and unfreezing c. Growth through developmental stages d. Perpetual evolution	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
20. I am a successful leader because I: a. Know what will happen before it happens b. Provide processes that are predictable c. Am flexible in the face of adversity d. Work with the patterns in the system	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	<b>a</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>c</b>	<b>d</b>
Total Page 3 (Questions 14 through 20)				

Overall Scores	a	b	c	d
Total Page 1 (Questions 1 through 5)				
Total Page 2 (Questions 6 through 13)				
Total Page 3 (Questions 14 through 20)				
<b>GRAND TOTALS</b>				


**Profile Directions and Example.** In the table below, find the number that matches your responses in each category. Darken that box and all the boxes below it. The columns that result are the profile of your Leadership Framework. In the example below, the scores were 12 a, 5 b, 6 c, 1 d. The total adds up to 24 because he marked more than one answer on four items.

a	b	c	d
20	20	20	20
19	19	19	19
18	18	18	18
17	17	17	17
16	16	16	16
15	15	15	15
14	14	14	14
13	13	13	13
12	12	12	12
11	11	11	11
10	10	10	10
9	9	9	9
8	8	8	8
7	7	7	7
6	6	6	6
5	5	5	5
4	4	4	4
3	3	3	3
2	2	2	2
1	1	1	1
0	0	0	0

**Traditional Leadership perspective**
**Complex Adaptive Leadership perspective**

Nothing is intractable.

**Your profile.** In the table below, find the number that matches your responses in each category. Darken that box and all the boxes below it. The columns that result are the profile of your Leadership Framework.

a	b	c	d
20	20	20	20
19	19	19	19
18	18	18	18
17	17	17	17
16	16	16	16
15	15	15	15
14	14	14	14
13	13	13	13
12	12	12	12
11	11	11	11
10	10	10	10
9	9	9	9
8	8	8	8
7	7	7	7
6	6	6	6
5	5	5	5
4	4	4	4
3	3	3	3
2	2	2	2
1	1	1	1
0	0	0	0
<b>Traditional Leadership perspective</b>			<b>Complex Adaptive Leadership perspective</b>
Control Predictability Objectives Accountability Reliability Stability Maintenance			Emergence Surprise Patterns Innovation Creativity Exploration Creative destruction

Nothing is intractable.

## Improve your Fit

### *Leadership Fit*

If your profile fits your leadership context, then you may expect:

- ▶ Success in the marketplace
- ▶ Happy customers and employees
- ▶ Low stress for you and your close associates
- ▶ Ease with defining and moving toward strategic and tactical objectives
- ▶ Reasonable cycle times for problem identification and resolution
- ▶ High productivity and motivation for you and your staff

The only advice for you is to watch the horizons for shifts in the landscape that may require more or less control-oriented action.

### *Too Traditional*

If your profile is more traditional than your leadership context, then you may expect:

- ▶ Lack of innovation in products and services
- ▶ Customers and/or employees who feel they are not being heard
- ▶ High stress when plans and expectations don't work out
- ▶ Difficulty finding a new vision or moving strategically into the future
- ▶ Slow response times for seeing and responding to problems
- ▶ Low productivity and motivation for you and your staff

If you are experiencing these outcomes, consider shifting your approaches. Look again at how you answered the questions and see where you might stretch yourself toward the behavior of the c or d. Select one or two shifts that seem doable, and try them for one week. At the end of the week, take the assessment again and look for other ways to stretch toward the complex adaptive perspective.



## ***Too Complex Adaptive***

If your profile leans to the right—is more complex adaptive than the leadership context, then you may expect:

- ▶ Lots of new ideas but a lack of follow through
- ▶ Lots of talk and not enough action
- ▶ High stress of surprise and lack of certainty for you, your staff, and your customers
- ▶ Frequent shifts in focus and strategy
- ▶ The same, unsolved problems popping up again and again
- ▶ Exhaustion and anxiety for you and your staff

If you are experiencing these outcomes, consider shifting to the more traditional leadership approaches. Look again at how you answered the question and see where you might stretch yourself toward the behavior of the a or b. Select one or two shifts that seem doable, and try them for one week. At the end of the week, take the assessment again and look for other ways to stretch toward the traditional leadership perspective.