Developing Self Leaders

A Competitive Advantage for Organisations

The nature of leadership continues to evolve as organisational structures and business models evolve. Top-heavy leadership approaches are shifting and in their place, individual contributors are being asked to step up in new ways, take on more responsibility, contribute differently, and look for ways to empower themselves—essentially to become self leaders.

In 2010, researchers Parker and Collins maintained that self leadership defined as proactivity is gaining in importance because of increased competitive pressures and the demand for innovation in the business world. The researchers claim that proactive self leaders perform their core tasks better. They go on to state that because careers are increasingly without boundaries and not confined to one organisation, individuals will continually add value to their organisations as they take charge of their careers.

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Parker and Collins compartmentalise self-leadership into a variety of skills: taking charge, having a voice, individual innovation, problem prevention, issue selling (credibility and willingness), strategic scanning, feedback inquiry, feedback monitoring, job change negotiation, and career initiative.

In a 2005 article, researchers Pearce and Manz claimed that self-leadership is a silver bullet for organisational success, describing it as a process of behavioural and cognitive self-evaluation and self-influence whereby people achieve the self-direction and self-motivation needed to shape their behaviors in positive ways in order to enhance their overall performance.

Enabling individual contributors to transition from being responsive to being responsible and proactive can encourage initiative, idea generation, and problem solving in those being asked to take on the role of self leadership. The confidence an individual gains from this type of empowerment improves autonomy, performance, and commitment, and provides tremendous value for the organisation.

Given the benefits of self leadership for both the individual and the organisation cited in recent research, could there be additional benefits? That's the question the researchers at Blanchard sought to answer via a study to explore the relationships between self-leadership attributes, job affect (how positively or negatively people feel about their jobs), basic psychological needs (Autonomy, Relatedness, Competence), and work intentions. We hypothesized that high levels of self leadership would correlate positively with positive job-related feelings, high-quality basic psychological needs, and high work intentions.

Study Methodology

Approximately 1,350 managers and non-managers from organisations based in many countries, including the United States, participated in the study, which was distributed to a convenience sample via the Qualtrics software platform. Respondents were given the opportunity to opt out of the study at any point. The data were analyzed using MPlus and SPSS. For the demographic breakdown of the respondent base, please see Appendix 1.

The study used Parker and Collins' self-leadership assessment, the Work-Related Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale, the AIM-J, and the Work Intention Inventory.

Parker and Collins' self-leadership assessment uses a 5-point Likert scale with response possibilities ranging from Very Infrequently to Very Frequently. The assessment includes nine distinct subscales that measure self-leadership behaviors such as selling one's ideas, taking initiative, being proactive, seeking feedback, innovating, communicating ideas, and negotiating job changes. The scale included items such as "I have a positive track record for selling issues," "I identify long-term opportunities and threats for the company," "I have discussed my aspirations with a senior person in the organisation," "I try to find the root cause of things that

Self-leadership is a silver bullet for organisational success

go wrong," "I generate creative ideas," "I speak up and encourage others in the workplace to get involved with issues that affect me," "I negotiate with others (e.g., supervisor, coworkers) about desirable job changes," "I try to bring about improved procedures in my workplace," and "I seek feedback from my supervisor about my work performance." The Work-Related Basic Need Satisfaction Scale (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens, and Lens, 2010), measuring one's levels of Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence, was also used. The scale includes items such as "I feel free to do my job the way I think it could best be done," "I feel competent at my job," and "At work, I feel part of a group." The scale uses a 7-point Likert scale, with response possibilities ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Blanchard's AIM-J (Affective Intensity Measure – Job), which has been correlated with the PANAS (positive and negative scale) created by Watson and Clark, was used as a measure of affect. The AIM-J is a semantic differential scale that uses 13 descriptive items such as Absorbed, Aware, Defensive, and Fearful. The AIM-J uses a 6-point Likert scale with response possibilities ranging from Not at All to Extremely.

Blanchard's Work Intention Inventory (WII)—developed by Kim Nimon, Drea Zigarmi, Dobie Houson, Jim Diehl, and David Witt—was also included. It uses five intention measures: Intent to exert discretionary effort on behalf of the organisation (I intend to volunteer to do things that may not be part of my job), Intent to perform (I intend to work efficiently to achieve all my work goals), Intent to endorse the organisation (I intend to talk positively about this organisation to family and friends), Intent to remain with the organisation (I intend to stay with this organisation even if offered a more appealing job elsewhere), and Intent to be a good organisational citizen (I intend to respect this organisation's assets). From earlier research, we know that these work intentions ultimately predict behaviour. When the scores in the five intention scales are high, it's an indication of the presence of positivity and high levels of work passion. The five intention scales each contain three items and use a 6-point Likert scale with response possibilities ranging from To No Extent to To the Fullest Extent.

> People who exhibit the behaviors of a self leader are more likely to expend discretionary effort on behalf of their organisations

Study Findings

Based on the analysis, the following findings were established as illustrated in the correlation table (Table 1) and structural equational models (SEM) (Figures 1A–1E). The table shows that the correlation coefficients between the nine self-leadership behaviors and the work intentions are, in general, medium (.110–.259) to large (.260+), with the exception of a few that were small (.01–.109). What the data show is that people who exhibit the behaviors of a self leader are more likely to expend discretionary effort on behalf of their organisations, have high intentions to do their job well, endorse the organisation as a great place to work, remain with the organisation, and behave in ways that support the organisation.

Table 1 – Correlations between the Self Leadership Behaviors and the Five Work Intentions (N≈1,350)

	Discretionary Effort	Intent to Perform	Intent to Endorse	Intent to Remain	Organisational Citizenship	Mean of All 5 Intentions
Idea Selling	0.232 Medium	0.275 Large	0.249 Medium	0.194 Medium	0.242 Medium	0.318 Large
Strategic Scanning	.323 Large	.261 Large	.225 Medium	.104 Small	.252 Medium	.301 Large
Taking Career Initiative	.225 Medium	.240 Medium	.239 Medium	.234 Medium	.182 Medium	.310 Large
Problem Prevention	.251 Medium	.344 Large	.193 Medium	.098 Small	.324 Large	.301 Large
Individual Innovation	.331 Large	.338 Large	.236 Medium	.135 Medium	.276 Large	.339 Large
Having a Voice	.338 Large	.364 Large	.262 Large	.197 Medium	.325 Large	.388 Large
Job Change Negotiation	.247 Medium	.150 Medium	.156 Medium	.102 Small	.114 Medium	.208 Medium
Taking Charge	.357 Large	.411 Large	.288 Large	.193 Medium	.345 Large	.413 Large
Feedback Inquiry	.268 Large	.208 Medium	.207 Medium	.180 Medium	.166 Medium	.281 Large
Total Mean Score of All 9 Self Leadership Scales	.442 Large	.436 Large	.354 Large	.252 Medium	.372 Large	.490 Large

Note: All correlation coefficients were statistically significant at the .001 level.

When interpreting the SEMs, read left to right and top to bottom. The data in SEMs below (Figures 1A, B, C, D, and E) show the path coefficients between the self-leadership behaviors; positive and negative affect; autonomy, relatedness, and competence (ARC); and the five work intentions. For the purpose of this paper, we developed a separate SEM for each intention to make the models easier to read, even though the data were run as one SEM.

In each SEM you will see a large positive path coefficient between self-leadership behaviors and positive affect, and a large negative path coefficient with negative affect. There are also large positive path coefficients between self-leadership behaviors and autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

What this means is that people who perceive themselves as self leaders and use the skills of proactively selling their ideas, taking career initiative, noticing and preventing problems, being innovative, having a voice, negotiating job changes, taking charge, and seeking feedback are more likely to feel good about their job, less likely to have negative feelings about the job, and likely to experience higher-quality autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

The data in first two thirds of the SEM illustrate that the most effective thing leaders and organisations can do is to give individual contributors opportunities and resources for them to increase their self-leadership skills.

In Figure 1A the path model illustrates that while there is a large positive path coefficient between positive affect and discretionary effort and a medium positive path coefficient between negative affect and discretionary effort, there were no significant path coefficients between ARC and discretionary effort. This means that individuals who have positive feelings about their jobs are more likely to exert discretionary effort. Conversely, the positive path coefficient between negative affect and discretionary effort can mean that people have negative feelings if they feel coerced to exert discretionary effort.

We know from previous research that discretionary effort is connected to an individual's experience with their peers. Meaning that if an individual sees his or her peers expending discretionary effort, they are more likely to expend discretionary effort as well.

Discretionary effort is generally a self-regulated activity and therefore not connected to an individual's experience of ARC, but more to a sense of passion about one's role and the meaning it has to them.

The lack of significant path coefficient between ARC and discretionary effort doesn't mean that ARC isn't important. It simply means that discretionary effort is influenced by things other than ARC. It's also possible that it wouldn't occur to people who perceive their needs for ARC are fulfilled *not* to provide discretionary effort to the organisation. And it means that discretionary effort is influenced by things other than basic psychological needs.

Self Leadership, Affect, and ARC to Discretionary Effort (N≈1,350)

Figure 1A
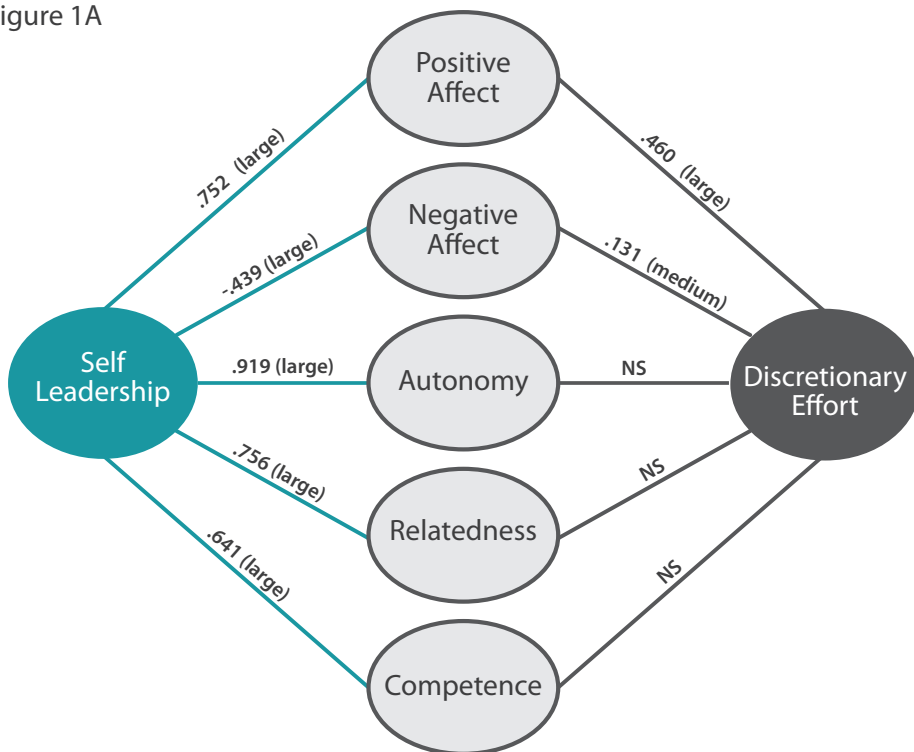
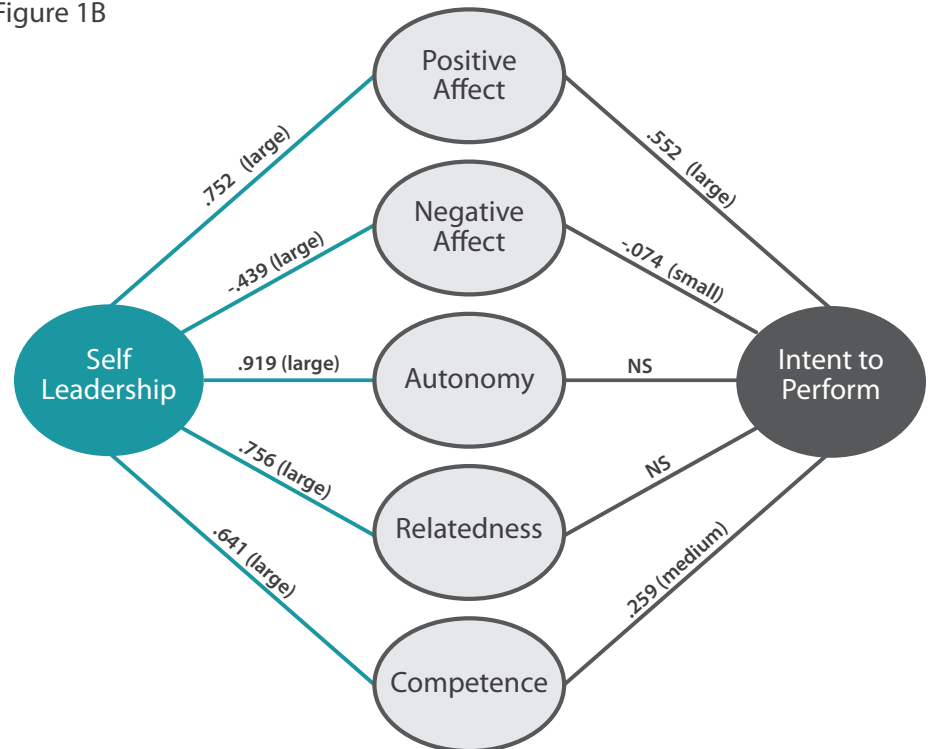People who are self leaders are more likely to have positive feelings about their jobs

In Figure 1B, the SEM illustrates that there is a large positive path coefficient between positive affect and intent to perform, a small negative path coefficient between negative affect and intent to perform, and a medium positive path coefficient between competence and intent to perform.

This means that someone who feels good about their work is more likely to want to continue to perform at high levels. It also means that a person who feels negatively about their work is less likely to want to perform at high levels. In addition, it illustrates that competence and intent to perform are connected and that the more competent an individual feels, the greater their intention to perform at higher than average levels.

The lack of significant path coefficient between autonomy and intent to perform and relatedness and intent to perform means that while both basic psychological needs are important, they do not influence this intention.

Self Leadership, Affect, and ARC to Intent to Perform (N≈1,350)

Figure 1B

Self leaders are more likely to perform at high levels

In Figure 1C, the SEM illustrates that there is a large positive path coefficient between positive affect and intent to endorse, a small negative path coefficient between negative affect and intent to endorse, a large positive path coefficient between autonomy and intent to endorse, no significant coefficient between relatedness and intent to endorse, and a small negative path coefficient between competence and intent to endorse.

This means that people who have positive feelings about their jobs and feel that they have the autonomy to do their jobs are more likely to endorse the organisation. Intent to endorse is an affect-based intention, meaning that it is a feeling-based intention rather than a cognitively based intention. The large path coefficient between autonomy and intent to endorse means that people who feel they have more control over their work and the freedom to decide how their work gets done will endorse the organisation as a good place to work.

The lack of significant path coefficient between relatedness and intent to endorse is interesting; while one might expect there to be a significant path coefficient because both concepts are affect based, that did not occur. It could be that relatedness is about one's positive connections to others as well as the meaning one derives from their work. The basic psychological needs scale used in this study didn't contain items that measured the concept of meaning-based work and that might account for the lack of significant path coefficients between the two concepts.

The small negative path coefficient between competence and intent to endorse means that competence doesn't influence someone's desire to endorse the organisation.

Self Leadership, Affect, and ARC to Intent to Endorse (N≈1,350)

Figure 1C
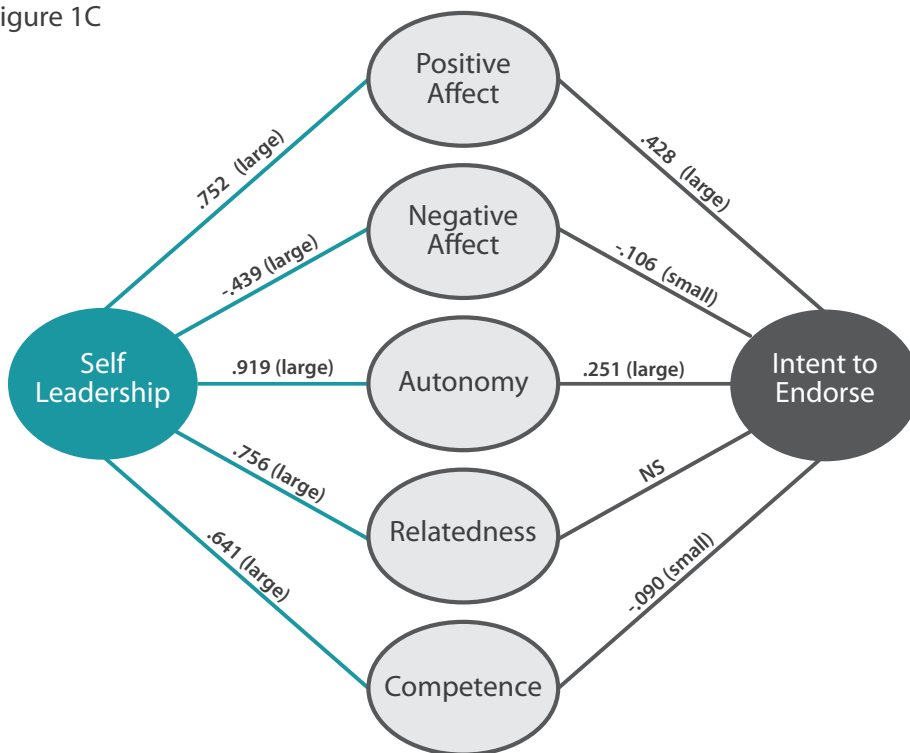
Self Leaders are more likely to endorse their organisation to others

The SEM for Figure 1D illustrates that there is a large positive path coefficient between positive affect and intent to remain, no significant path coefficient between negative affect and intent to remain, a large path coefficient between autonomy and intent to remain, no significant path coefficient between relatedness and intent to remain, and a large negative path coefficient with competence.

This means that people who are happy with their jobs and feel that they have autonomy in their roles are more likely to remain with their organisations. The lack of significant path coefficient between relatedness and intent to remain could be explained by the fact that people don't generally remain at an organisation because of the relationships they have with others; they remain because they feel they are doing meaningful work, they work for an organisation that is fair and just, and that the work they are doing is challenging and has variety. Autonomy mediates (transmits the effect of) intent to remain. Conversely, if people don't have autonomy, they are less likely to remain with the organisation.

The small negative path coefficient between competence and intent to remain is explained by the fact that the more competent people feel, the more confident they are and the more likely they will be to seek out positions elsewhere that might provide greater growth and development opportunities.

Self Leadership, Affect, and ARC to Intent to Remain (N≈1,350)

Figure 1D

Self Leaders are more likely to remain with their organisations
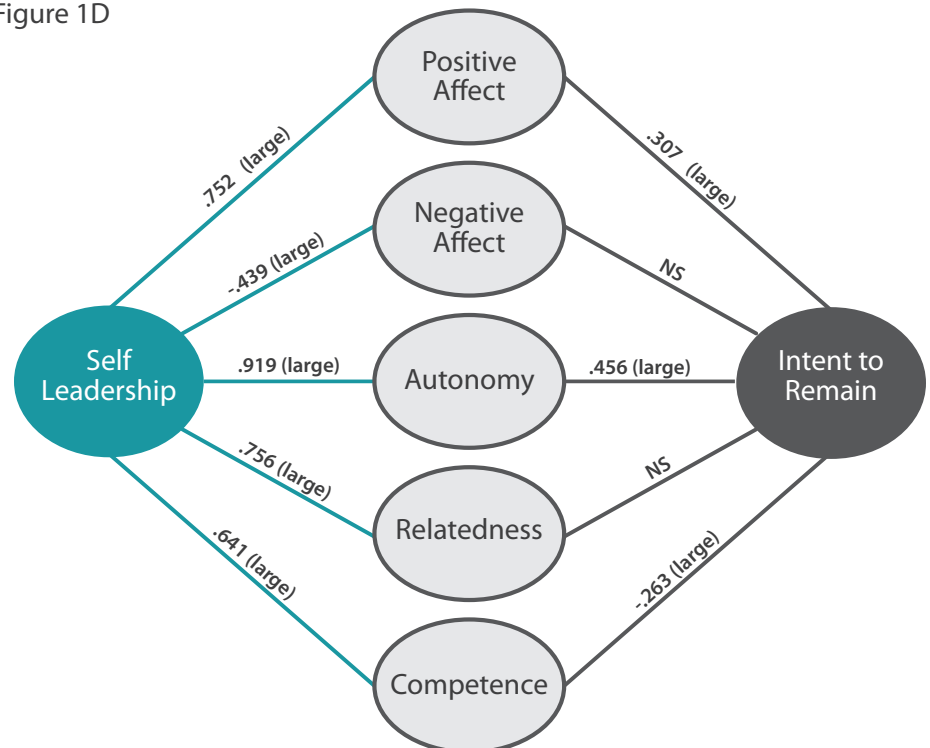
The SEM for Figure 1E illustrates that positive affect has a large positive path coefficient with organisational citizenship and a medium negative path coefficient with negative affect. There is also a large positive path coefficient between competence and organisational citizenship.

This means that people who feel good about their jobs also intend to behave in ways that benefit the organisation, while people who have negative feelings about their jobs may act in ways that do not benefit the organisation. The large positive path coefficient between competence and organisational citizenship is explained by the fact that people who feel competent tend to have positive feelings about their jobs and themselves, and are therefore more likely to look for ways to enhance the welfare of others in the organisation and the organisation's resources. The path coefficients in this model indicated that sharing expertise is more a function of competence than autonomy or relatedness.

Self Leadership, Affect, and ARC to organisational Citizenship (N≈1,350)

Figure 1E
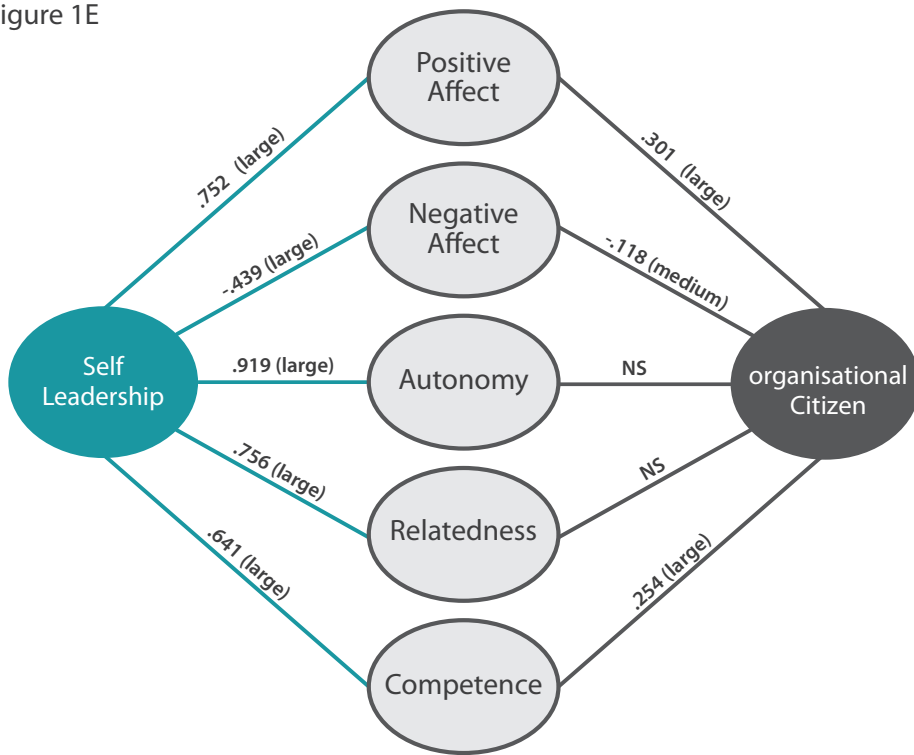
Self Leaders are good organisational citizens

Self leadership is a mindset and skillset that can be taught or learned.

The Mindset and Skillset of a Self Leader

Research provides compelling evidence that individual contributors are pivotal to successfully implementing organisational initiatives and improving customer loyalty. Despite their essential role, individual contributors are often overlooked when it comes to training—and that can derail organisational performance and productivity. According to Susan Fowler, noted author and expert on self leadership, what many organisations don't understand is that self leadership is a skill that can be developed.

Everyone, regardless of their position in an organisation, is a leader, but it's important to understand the tools and skills necessary to become a self leader. Self leadership is a mindset and skillset that can be taught or learned. In their book *Self Leadership and The One Minute Manager*, Fowler and her coauthors Ken Blanchard and Laurie Hawkins reveal the three critical components of each.

The Self Leadership Mindset

The first component of a self-leadership mindset is the ability to challenge assumed constraints. An assumed constraint is a belief based on past experience that limits new experiences. For example, when he challenged the conventional wisdom—the assumed constraint—that severe physical disabilities would limit his career, Stephen Hawking went on to become one of the most celebrated physicists in history.

Fowler reports that for individual contributors to evolve into self leaders, they need to challenge their assumed constraints every day at work. For example, if you assume that your manager should know what you need because she makes more money than you do, you are less likely to seek the help you need. If you assume that no one will listen to your idea because you tried once and were rejected, then you seriously limit your ability to effect positive change.

The second component of a self-leadership mindset is the ability to activate points of power, namely: position power (having a position of authority to allocate budget and make personnel decisions), task power (the ability to influence how a job or task is executed), personal power (having personal characteristics that provide an edge when pursuing goals), relationship power (being connected or friendly with people who have power), and knowledge power (experience and expertise).

Believing they lack the power to affect outcomes or take initiative because it's not specifically spelled out in their job description may be an individual contributor's greatest assumed constraint. Too often, individual contributors assume that because they do not have position power, they cannot be leaders or influence outcomes. But people can tap into other points of power, dramatically improving their performance and productivity and, ultimately, their sense of well-being. For example,

- An administrative assistant activated her task power when scheduling a top-level executive and created new procedures to maximise his time and productivity.
- A graphic designer activated his knowledge power to become a regional manager of the graphic design department for a large firm.
- A young woman whose father founded the ad agency where she worked tapped into her relationship power to advocate at the dinner table on behalf of other employees.
- An instructional designer whose talent was inherent and "easy," finally activated her knowledge power and began teaching others.

The third component of a self-leadership mindset is the ability to be proactive. Self leaders don't always wait to be told what to do—they hold themselves accountable for getting what they need to succeed. They think for themselves and make suggestions for improving things in the department and in their roles. They often think about new projects they'd like to tackle and consider what they might need from their managers to make it happen. They conduct proactive conversations at every level of their development to solicit feedback and ask for direction and support.

The Mindset of a Self Leader

Challenge Assumed Constraints

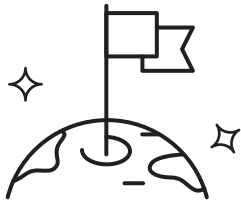### Activate Points of Power

Be Proactive
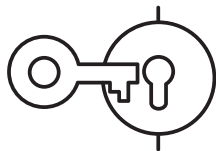
The Skillset of a Self Leader

Goal Setting

Diagnosing

Matching

The Self Leadership Skillset

The first component of a self-leadership skillset is the ability to set goals. Self leaders take the lead to make sure the goals are specific, motivating, attainable, relevant, and trackable. If a goal lacks specificity, they seek clarification. If a goal is not attainable or relevant, they negotiate to make it more fair, within their control, and tied to the company's metrics. If a goal is not optimally motivating for them, they reframe the goal so it is meaningful by aligning the goal to personal values or a noble purpose.

This second component of a self-leadership skillset requires that people learn to diagnose their own development level—their current level of competence and commitment for achieving a goal or task. If people believe they don't have the tools, skills, and competence to do a specific task or solve a specific problem, they need to ask for direction—someone to show them how. If people doubt themselves and are wavering on their commitment to do the job, they need to ask for support—someone to listen and help facilitate their problem solving. Among the hallmarks of self leadership is learning to diagnose personal competence and commitment and identify what is needed to speed up the process of development and growth.

The third component of a self-leadership skillset is the ability to get a leadership style that matches their needs. After diagnosing their competence and commitment on a particular goal, self leaders need to proactively ask for the direction (guidance and clarification) and support (listening and problem solving) they need to make progress on the goal. For effective self leaders, a leader is anyone who can provide them with the direction and support they need when they need it.

Conclusion

Individual contributors are the silent majority of your organisation. Yet sadly, while they are the most crucial part of the organisation's workforce, they're a woefully underused resource. Rarely do they receive the training they need to reach their full potential. Performance in organisations is often stalled because employees don't know how to ask for what they need when they need it.
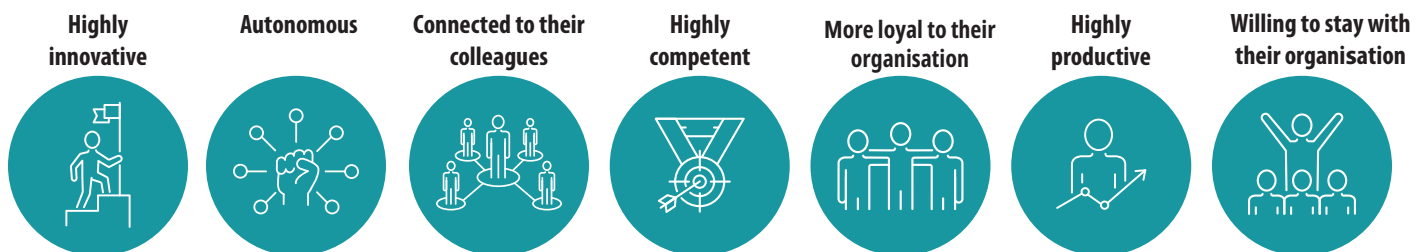
People armed with the skills of self-leadership feel more positive about themselves and their jobs. They also have the characteristics of employee work passion: they perform at higher levels, endorse the organisation positively, have higher levels of autonomy and competence, and are more likely to remain with the organisation. When people become empowered self leaders, they're proactive self-starters who look for ways to make your organisation flourish.

Organisations have traditionally aimed training budgets toward leadership development. But research indicates that this narrow focus comes at the expense of individual contributors and the success of important organisational initiatives.

As it turns out, the most crucial element in successful initiatives lies in the proactive behaviour of the individual contributors required to carry them out. The conclusion reached by this compelling body of research is that organisations would be wise to equip their employees with the mindset and skillset to diagnose their situation, accept responsibility, and hold themselves accountable for taking action.

A culture that fosters self leadership is a characteristic of great organisations. By training people to develop into self leaders, organisations become more customer-centric, cost effective, innovative, resilient, and flexible. And all because they have mastered a key best practice: making sure that leadership happens everywhere, not just in the C-suite.

Blanchard research shows that people who exhibit the traits of self leaders are more likely to be:

Highly innovative	Autonomous	Connected to their colleagues	Highly competent	More loyal to their organisation	Highly productive	Willing to stay with their organisation

APPENDIX 1

Demographic Breakdown of Respondent Base

Manager/Non-Manager

Manager................................... 68%
Non-Manager....................... 32%

Total......................................100%

Gender

Male.. 48%
Female 52%

Total......................................100%

Year of Birth (Range)

1901–1925 ....0%
1926–1942 ....1%
1943–1960 .... 37%
1961–1981 .... 56%
1982–present..........................6%

Total......................................100%

Level of Education

GED...0%
High school diploma.............7%
Associate's/2-year degree....6%
Bachelor's degree 33%
Master's degree................... 42%
Doctoral/advanced
professional degree............ 11%

Total...100

Location in the World (Region)

Asia 4%
Australia/New Zealand.........2%
Canada 5%
Europe 11%
Africa/Middle East.................3%
Latin/South America 4%
United States........................ 71%

Total......................................100%

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Biography

Dr. Drea Zigarmi, the Director of Research for Blanchard, has published five books on leadership and authored numerous articles in various journals. Drea also teaches at the University of San Diego in the Master of Science in Executive Leadership Program. He holds a bachelor's degree in biology from Norwich University, a master's degree in humanistic education, and an EdD in organisational studies from the University of Massachusetts.

Susan Fowler is widely known as one of the foremost experts on personal empowerment and motivation. She is the coauthor of more than seven books, including *Self Leadership and the One Minute Manager* with Ken Blanchard and Laurie Hawkins, *Achieve Leadership Genius* with Drea Zigarmi and Dick Lyles, *Leading at a Higher Level* with Ken Blanchard and most recently the bestseller *Why Motivating People Doesn't Work…and What Does*.

Dobie Houson is Director of Marketing Research for Blanchard and is responsible for competitive, market, and customer intelligence.

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