From Classroom to Boardroom:
Early identification and development of leadership potential

Nature or nurture? As businesses continue to battle volatility and uncertainty, the “origin of leaders” debate grows louder. It is little wonder, then, that our clients want to learn more about leadership potential, and how, when, and where they can spot it. Fortunately, we can provide some answers. Our new research shows that leadership potential can be identified earlier than you might imagine, and there are ways to catalyse this potential before would-be leaders graduate from school. How? With a little help from their parents!

A love of leadership: When does the motivation appear, and for whom?

Over 300 parents, located around the world, rated the frequency (on a five-point scale) with which their children—aged 2 to 22 years old—demonstrate 10 leadership potential characteristics. For one of these, Motivation to Lead (displaying an upward ambition to influence or pursuing formal/informal leadership opportunities), we see an early enthusiasm for leadership among toddlers (4.2) that dramatically falls away during middle school (3.0).

What explains this drop in motivation? Open-ended comments from parents cited the pressure for young teens to follow the status quo rather than stand out from the “pack.” One survey participant summed this up succinctly: “My oldest daughter used to be totally comfortable in a leadership role but, as she got older, she became more of a conformist and now sometimes completely lacks self-confidence.”

For females, restoring initial levels of motivation for leadership is a greater challenge. Our data indicate that male enthusiasm for leadership climbs after high school and rises to 4.4 in college/university. Meanwhile, female motivation improves steadily as well but never reaches higher than a 3.5 rating—much below the...
level of their two- to five-year-old selves. This gender “gap” is concerning. How can we drive diversity in the working world when females are less motivated to lead? Organisations should be on alert and look for ways to encourage females to lead early in their careers (e.g., apprenticeships or cohort groups) and ensure a balanced pipeline.

A taste of leadership: Who wins the crucial “trial” opportunities and what are the benefits?

We also surveyed parents about their children’s activities and looked at the impact of these outside-of-classroom endeavours on leadership potential. What we saw was a correlation between holding an elected position of leadership and the likelihood of demonstrating many of the indicators of potential, including Motivation to Lead, Receptivity to Feedback, Bringing Out the Best in People, and Navigating Ambiguity.

**FIGURE 2 | ELECTED POSITIONS ARE THE BEST OPPORTUNITY TO HONE LEADERSHIP SKILLS**

Nearly two-thirds of high school positions occupied by males

![Elected Student Leader](image)

Most children gain experience in elected leadership at high school

Unfortunately, our results also show that males attain 60 percent of these high school elected positions. This may relate to the earlier finding about female motivation to target and win these roles, and be a reflection of the glass ceiling awaiting later life. What we do know is that, gender notwithstanding, only a handful of students will be elected to lead. Therefore, parents can look for ways to give their children a preview of leadership by encouraging their involvement in the management of household or family activities. Getting this kind of sample “taste” may foster leadership skills, including Receptivity to Feedback or Navigating Ambiguity. Similarly, within organisations, companies can identify opportunities for less “official” leadership positions earlier in the pipeline (e.g., department or division representatives), thus offering exposure to leadership expectations and providing a preview of leadership responsibilities before promotion.
Leadership potential equality: Gender similarities

Good news: In five areas of leadership potential, there was no significant difference in capability across the genders. Restated, for 50 percent of the critical leadership attributes we looked at, males and females are neck-and-neck when it comes to exhibiting these during the pre-work years.

FIGURE 3 | GENDER SIMILARITIES FOR CRITICAL LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES

Males and females demonstrate similar leadership attributes in five areas

What’s even more encouraging is that, in many ways, the five critical attributes are the least “trainable.” It’s much easier to develop coaching skills or teach someone to avoid deflecting feedback, than to build skills for demonstrating Authenticity or having a Passion for Results. The fact that these five skills are consistently observed in both male and female children bodes well for future development efforts in organisations.

Where children spend their out-of-class hours matters

Our parent participants expressed similar motives for completing our survey: “I am interested in how to best guide my daughter” or “My son appears to be a natural leader but I don’t know how to support him.” This is why we looked at their children’s extracurricular activities. We have already shown that elected leadership positions provide the strongest correlation with the 10 leadership attributes, but we were eager to explore which less competitive, pre-high school activities also show a correlation with one or more of these leadership characteristics.
All after-school activities aren’t created equal

There is a correlation between specific after-school activities and the demonstration of leadership attributes

Here are the relationships we found between certain after-school activities and leadership behaviours:

- Social Clubs or Associations = Authenticity and Navigates Ambiguity
- Acting Classes = Culture Fit and Receptivity to Feedback
- Activities associated with Money/Commercialism = Passion for Results and Adaptability
- Music Classes = Culture Fit and Receptivity to Feedback
- Team or Individual Sports = Motivation to Lead and Brings Out the Best in People

It’s clear that encouraging extracurricular activities, singularly or in combination, helps to nurture leadership potential. Parents can and do support involvement early on, especially when it comes to sports and music. For organisations eager to recruit leadership potential this data has significant implications: Hiring managers should value the “hobbies and interests” listed on candidate resumes, and not ignore these outside activities to focus solely on technical abilities.
Money talks: The rise of the primary school entrepreneur

Mark Zuckerberg and Evan Spiegel were both millionaires before 24. In contrast, Warren Buffett and Oprah Winfrey made their millions after 30. Studies show that the average age of millionaires is decreasing, and our data reveals that money is on the minds of younger-than-expected children. Specifically, parents reported that 70 percent of their primary school children either show an interest in money or wanting to make money. One primary school parent commented, “I see in my son an urge to create something unique, something worthwhile in the field of technology and particularly creative designing of apps, videos, films and much more.”

While there are leadership-related benefits to such early interest (including having a Passion for Results and demonstrating Adaptability), there is also a potential downside: an early end to childhood. Parents may want to consider how to feed this financial hunger without sacrificing the years of innocence. There may also be a need for parents to balance such commercial curiosity with the promotion of quality interaction skills.

FIGURE 5 | MONEY HUNGRY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Does having an early interest in money contribute to or widen the gender wage gap?

When slicing and dicing the primary school data by gender, we see that commercial interest is statistically higher in males than females, and this difference continues into the middle school years. This may set salary expectations early in life and contribute to the gender pay gap. It also offers an opportunity for parents of daughters to speak more openly about wage equality and encourage future-earning confidence by nudging their girls to seek out early employment (e.g., babysitting, dog walking, etc.).
About the Author

VERITY CREEDY
Verity is a sales leader for DDI Europe. She launched this fun-loving survey to parents after theorising that her four-year-old niece is not "bossy" and instead demonstrates a propensity for leadership.

CONTRIBUTORS:
Evan Sinar, Ph.D., Chief Scientist & Vice President
Terri Sota, Senior Writer
Jennifer Pesci-Kelly, Marketing Manager

About Development Dimensions International

Only 2 in 10 companies today have the leaders to meet tomorrow's business challenges. The good news? When they do, they are 3 times more likely to destroy the competition.

What if you could:

- Build the capability of leaders to beat the odds against failed business strategies?
- Make leadership selection and promotion decisions with pinpoint accuracy?
- Architect learning experiences that ignite the passion of your leaders to grow and learn every day?
- Secure your future with succession plans that build a strong leadership bench strength, bottom-up and top-down?

DDI can make it happen. Obsessed with the science of leadership. Four decades of experience and results. Across thousands of organizations in 93 countries. One million better leaders. Let us show you the art of leadership possibilities.