We can all think of those who seem to have been born to lead. There are almost always at least a couple of such leaders in every hospital. They stand out because they give the impression that they can make things happen and that they are going to succeed at anything. We often determine the success of these leaders long before their performance results come in.

This kind of leadership can be learned by those who are not natural-born leaders. The road to becoming such a leader takes discipline, and it is much harder for some than for others. We firmly believe, however, that the practices, also known as competencies (see Exhibit 1), of exceptional leaders can be picked up by anyone.

Those in the position of selecting leaders can also benefit from learning about competencies. It will help them in their assessments of candidates and in their hiring decisions. A hiring mistake at the senior level is disastrous for any organization, and a better understanding of exactly what comprises highly effective leadership will minimize this risk.
Exhibit 1

What is a competency?

Many definitions of competencies exist, but the late David McClelland (1973) is widely regarded as providing the original and most authoritative definition. At the time of his writing, intelligence and skills tests were the main tools used to make selection decisions. McClelland’s work was an attempt to move beyond a narrow, skills-focused definition of success to examine broader, underlying characteristics of individuals that could be used to predict success.

In brief, competencies include a broad collection of knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics. They include values (such as ethics and integrity), cognitive skills (such as thinking and problem solving), interpersonal skills (such as communicating and listening), embracing diversity (such as tolerance and respect), and change management (such as strategic planning and risk taking).

As deeper-level constructs, competencies are not something learned from a day-long training workshop or a class. They are more accurately described as improving slowly over time as a result of mindful practice, feedback, and more practice.

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY MODEL

We organized this book around 16 leadership competencies. These are the competencies most associated with exceptional leadership in healthcare. We arrived at this list through the following steps:

1. We examined the competency lists prepared by boards and executives for use in their executive searches.
2. We pared this list down to those competencies that reliably differentiated the highest-performing leaders—people who made the short lists and who usually got hired.
3. We surveyed eight seasoned search consultants (with more than 100 collective years of search experience) who work exclusively in healthcare. We asked each of them the following questions:
   - What are the most important competencies your clients request when looking for new executives?
• Consider the three best executives you have ever placed in your search careers. Exactly what leadership competencies did these leaders have that set them apart from the others? We retained the competencies submitted by multiple search consultants.

4. We posed similar questions regarding leadership competencies to healthcare chief executive officers (CEOs) and executive coaches.

5. To refine our conceptualizations of these 16 competencies, we compared and contrasted them with reviews of the academic leadership literature and competency lists of well-known consulting firms.

Our end goal was to develop a competency model focused enough to help aspiring exceptional leaders zero-in on their greatest development opportunities and rich enough to be revisited many times in the years to come.

We have organized these competencies into four traits, which we call the cornerstones of exceptional leadership:

Cornerstone 1: Well-cultivated self-awareness
Cornerstone 2: Compelling vision
Cornerstone 3: Real way with people
Cornerstone 4: Masterful style of execution

These cornerstones anchor our leadership model on the foundation of having a healthy self-concept, which is discussed later in this introduction. Figure 1 illustrates this foundation model.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR CORNERSTONES

Cornerstone 1: Well-Cultivated Self-Awareness

Self-awareness means understanding yourself as a leader—in particular, your strengths, limitations, hot buttons, and blind spots.
Developing self-awareness requires leaders to intellectually and emotionally process on two levels. First, leaders must develop the ability to collect accurate, high-quality feedback from the work environment. Second, leaders must contemplate with an open mind what that feedback means to them and to their performance as a leader.

While these processes sound deceptively simple, in reality they are far from simple. We all receive some feedback from the environment, and we all accept it with some open mindedness. The magnitude of both this environment and our capacity for being open minded makes the difference between good leadership and exceptional leadership. Exceptional leaders make sure their environment is rich in feedback (see Appendix E for suggestions on how to develop a feedback-rich environment) and internalize the feedback they receive.

High performance in the area of self-awareness also involves mastery of two competencies: living by personal conviction and possessing emotional intelligence. You can think of personal conviction as the driving force that guides you in serving a larger purpose; emotional intelligence, in contrast, involves the management of that purpose in the relationships you forge.
Cornerstone 2: Compelling Vision

Of the four cornerstones, a compelling vision tends to be both the most visible and the most closely associated with senior leadership roles. At the senior level, if leaders hit their ceilings before reaching their career goals, it is usually because they have not mastered one or more of the competencies in this cornerstone.

There are three competencies comprising this cornerstone associated with exceptional leadership: being visionary, communicating vision, and earning loyalty and trust.

Being visionary is the heart of this cornerstone and begins this section of the book. Vision can be defined as the capacity to create effective plans for your organization’s future, based on a clear understanding of trends, uncertainties, risks, and rewards. Defined in this way, we can separate creation of vision from the process of building awareness and understanding of the vision (i.e., communicating vision) as well as gaining support from the “unconverted” (i.e., earning loyalty and trust).

Cornerstone 3: Real Way with People

This cornerstone relates to implementation—making things happen through people and through process.

Interpersonal relations are a central part of the leader’s role, and most leaders who have been around a while already have a reasonably well-developed set of interpersonal skills. At a minimum, most leaders recognize that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, that people care about more than just their paycheck, and that interpersonal conflicts rarely go away on their own. That said, our experience leads us to conclude that (1) outstanding leaders typically have outstanding interpersonal skills, and (2) most leaders have at least some room for growth in the area of interpersonal relations.

The interpersonal domain can be meaningfully split into five competencies: listening like you mean it, giving feedback, mentoring others, developing champion teams, and energizing staff.
In each case, our focus is on how to refine an already strong skill set to the level of outstanding performance. We begin this section with a chapter on listening, which in many ways is the central unifying characteristic of this cornerstone. In describing what makes an executive effective, Peter Drucker (2004) identified eight practices and just one rule: “Listen first, speak last.”

**Cornerstone 4: Masterful Style of Execution**

The final cornerstone turns to an examination of execution—where the rubber meets the road in getting activities assigned to strategies, decisions made, tasks accomplished, and agendas moved forward.

Leaders are ultimately judged in terms of what they get done. Regardless of the leadership competencies they exhibit, the true measure of their impact is the success they bring to their organizations.

Although success in execution is strongly affected by the quality of a leader’s working relationships, it is also affected by the approaches the leader uses. The six competencies that most distinguish the highest performing leaders in this domain are generating informal power, building consensus, making decisions, driving results, stimulating creativity, and cultivating adaptability. We examine each of these in turn.

**HOW IS THIS BOOK STRUCTURED?**

Each of the 16 competencies is explored in its own stand-alone chapter. Each chapter is organized around the following sections:

- *Opening vignette.* This section provides an example of the type of situation in which leaders can shine if they demonstrate a mastery of the competency.
- *Definition of the competency.* This section explains what the competency is and why it is so important.
- *When highly effective leaders demonstrate the competency.* Here
we describe, in specific details, what extraordinary leadership looks like when the competency is mastered.

- **When the competency is not all it could be.** Here we describe the common skill deficits that prevent good leaders from being great leaders in this competency.

- **Misuse and overuse: how the competency can work against you.** Sometimes leaders get into trouble because they overdo it. Here we describe what problems can arise for overdoing or misusing a given competency.

- **Finding role models.** One of the very best ways to learn new skills is to find a master to help you. In this section, we tell you where you are most likely to find people who have mastered the competency.

- **Additional opportunities for personal development.** Not all leadership development is equally effective. Here we provide options for developing a competency area, focusing on what has been shown to work best and what our colleagues and clients tell us have been most helpful to them.

### Appendixes

In the appendixes, we have assembled a wealth of additional tools to help you along the path of personal development, including the following:

- A self-assessment questionnaire and scoring guide for each of the competencies
- A sample self-development plan
- An action plan for developing a feedback-rich working environment
- An action plan for implementing a 360-degree feedback program

Appendix A provides a set of self-reflection questions, which can help you prioritize your development by assessing your strengths and
development needs. Appendix B provides a framework for structuring, implementing, and monitoring your leadership self-development plan.

Throughout this book, we make the case for finding and using mentors in developing your skills. Appendix C provides specific guidance on how to best approach mentors for their help and, once they have agreed to work with you, how to gain the maximum benefit from their experience and skills. For those of you in a position to avail yourself of professional mentoring, Appendix D provides guidelines for identifying and screening executive coaches as well as ensuring you are in the best position to benefit from what they have to offer.

Because most leadership skill development comes through practice, we also repeatedly make the case for ensuring you receive the most useful feedback available in your environment. Appendix E details how to cultivate a feedback-rich organizational climate using a variety of techniques. Lastly, Appendix F provides a decision-making framework and reviews the 360-degree feedback process for developmental purposes.

**SELF-CONCEPT: THE FOUNDATION**

As do real cornerstones, the four cornerstones of exceptional leadership must rest on a firm foundation. In the case of leadership, this foundation is a healthy self-concept.

**The Critical Importance of Self-Concept**

To be an exceptional leader and to perform at a superior level, it is essential that you have a healthy *self-concept*. Having a healthy self-concept means you agree with each of the following:

- You are satisfied with your place in the world and feel that you have a purpose in life.
- You feel a sense of control over your life and destiny.
- You are confident in your ability to achieve what you set out to do.
- You have a positive self-image.
- You feel comfortable with how you relate to others.
More simply, self-concept is your own understanding of and comfort level about yourself. Some people may refer to self-concept as self-esteem, or self-confidence, or self-value. Regardless of the terminology, the message is the same: If you are content and happy with who you are and what you have accomplished, you are comfortable with others as well and are fully accepting of their achievements and contributions, regardless of whether those contributions may be deemed to be of higher value than yours.

We are disappointed in the lack of attention that this subject receives. Most leadership development courses and their content material focus principally on behaviors and competencies. The reality is that without a healthy self-concept, the other leadership competencies at best will feel unnatural and at worst will never be mastered.

In the words of one well-known CEO, “I can usually tell more about leaders and their potential through learning how they perceive themselves than in any other way.” Leaders with a positive self-concept do not have to tear down others to bring themselves up. They rarely yell, scream, or curse, and they do not feel the need to play political games for their own gain. Their value systems engender a positive regard for others because they first have a high, but appropriate, regard for themselves.

We consider positive self-concept a prerequisite for exceptional leadership because it influences every aspect of a leader’s effectiveness. Self-concept makes its most visible difference in the way leaders handle success and failure and work with others.

Successes and Failures

While highly effective leaders are driven to achieve, they are in control of that drive. They enjoy their accomplishments and take pride in them. Failures and setbacks may bother them but do not tear them apart.

Leaders with a poor self-concept view accomplishments as simple milestones—expected points of passage on the way to other landmarks. They rarely see the value of praise given to their organization or community. These leaders are often said to be out to prove something.

A similar phenomenon occurs with failures. Leaders with high self-regard view their failures in a balanced fashion—sure, there is
pain in failing, but there is also the opportunity to learn from mistakes. Failures will not cause great leaders to retreat from daring decisions in the future; instead, they will continue to move boldly but do so in a better-informed manner. Leaders with low self-regard do not see failures in the same way. They blame failures on others and on bad luck, and they seldom learn from such mistakes.

**Working with Others**
The more accepting leaders are of themselves, the better they are at accepting others. A leader’s capacity to accept others creates a climate of psychological safety in the workplace. A safe climate allows people to better receive and use constructive feedback because they will not be distracted by feelings of personal vulnerability. Conversely, if people feel that their job is at risk, they are far more likely to act defensively, with self-preservation as their primary goal and the good of the team or organization as a secondary consideration.

A healthy self-concept also lends itself to encouraging and embracing diversity in the workplace. We have found that those who have a solid self-concept are more tolerant and accepting of people who have different backgrounds and beliefs. One of the hallmarks of exceptional leadership is the willingness and ability to assemble teams made up of diverse individuals. These leaders know that there is a great advantage to having such a team. Today’s great leaders must continually incorporate diversity initiatives into their strategies; a strong self-concept makes doing this much easier.

Make no mistake: leaders can go very far *without* a healthy self-concept. We have observed several leaders who possess a low sense of self-worth but still reach top positions in healthcare. They may even be successful throughout their entire careers. In fact, some are driven overachievers, and others are absolute perfectionists or are compulsively controlling. However, these leaders’ achievements typically come at the expense of others. They use tactics such as fear, intimidation, and political manipulation that can tear at the fabric of an otherwise positive organizational culture. Their direct reports are unlikely to
reach their full potential, and there are limits on how far people will follow these kinds of leaders.

We are clearly not alone in this perspective. A stream of research has been emerging that links self-regard to effectiveness. Several recent studies have found significant connections between self-concept (termed “core self-evaluations” in academia) and both job performance and job satisfaction (Judge and Bono 2000). Perhaps even more telling is that self-concept may also determine how much mentoring leaders receive during their career (Hezlett 2003), how effectively leaders can hear and use feedback on their performance (Bono and Colbert 2005), and how capable leaders are to recognize and pursue strategic opportunities on behalf of their organizations (Hiller and Hambrick 2005).

What to Do If Your Self-Concept Is Low

If you do not see this foundation in yourself, we recommend that you make building your self-concept a top priority. That may very well mean putting this book aside for a while or at least not beginning with these competencies as your primary focus. A positive self-concept is not something you can get from a book. However, we can suggest some useful first steps.

Consider How You Feel About Yourself

Are you satisfied with your life? Do you enjoy who you are, or do you have a nagging sense of regret? What about your career? Do you feel good about your achievements, or bad about the opportunities you may have missed out on? When you accomplish something, can you take pride in it, or do you view every achievement as nothing more than a means toward some greater end? When you fail at something, can you accept the lessons learned, or do you just curse yourself for trying in the first place? When someone else fails you, are you able to see their side, or do you find yourself quickly turning against them? If you were to learn that this day was your
last, would you feel you had spent your life well?

The greater your personal discomfort with yourself, the more room you have to grow in the area of self-concept, and the more likely it is that this development should be your first priority.

**Ask Those Closest to You for Their Candid Feedback**

Consult a spouse, significant other, family member, or spiritual confidante to seek their opinion of your self-concept. Listen to them with an open mind, and try to take what they say at face value. Often, the people who know us well know us better than we know ourselves. Remember also that perceptions are often more important than reality.

**Build on Your Positive Qualities**

Build a focus on your positive physical, mental, and emotional qualities. What are you good at? What do you do well? What do you like about yourself? Use these positive concepts to counterbalance the aspects you feel less positive about. Enumerate your accomplishments. Celebrate achievements. Congratulate yourself on things you do well.

**Seek to Understand Your “Dark” Side**

Having a healthy self-concept does not mean that you have no sore spots or hot buttons. But it does mean that you know your vulnerabilities so that you can prevent them from undermining you. Understanding your “dark” side requires the discipline to face your vulnerabilities, to examine how they have interfered with your effectiveness in the past, and to learn how to spot the warning signals and what to do when you see them.

**Enlist Some Help**

Unlike the other competencies in this book, self-concept may *not* work as well as a self-development project. Professional assistance from a coach, spiritual counselor, therapist, or other professional with specialized training can make a big difference in the speed of your progress.
A FINAL WORD

With a mastery of these competencies, you will have the capacity to be an effective leader; however, you should expect the process to take considerable time and effort (see Exhibit 2). To master these leadership competencies, you will need to invest time to reflect on how you practice each competency. You may also need to develop and maintain reliable and accurate feedback mechanisms in your workplace. You will also need to master the ability to maintain your ground during times of substantial turbulence.

We wish you the best on your self-development and your career, and we hope you find this book to be a helpful guide along the way.

REFERENCES


Appendix A
Self-Reflection Questions

The following self-reflection questions can help you determine what areas you need to work on to enhance a particular leadership competency. Read each question and reflect on a truthful answer, making notes as you see appropriate. After you have worked through the questions, review all question sets to determine which area you felt most strongly about. You may also want to use a trusted confidant with whom to compare your answers.

CHAPTER 1: LIVING BY PERSONAL CONVICTION

• To what extent are you driven by a clear set of values, principles, and goals?
• How well do you understand how your values, principles, and goals developed?
• How broadly have your values been influenced? Were they developed by gaining perspective on a wide-ranging understanding of living and the issues of the world (as contrasted to developing them from narrower experience)?
• How effective are you in recognizing when your fundamental belief systems are challenged? How methodical are you in reconciling these challenges?
CHAPTER 2: POSSESSING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

• To what extent are you aware of your emotions? To what extent do you understand rationally why you react the way you do?
• Do you see the linkage between your emotions/feelings and your behavior?
• To what extent can you manage your emotions? Can you control anger? Can you focus frustration? How effective are you at engaging others even when you are upset, mad, or irate?
• To what extent would you describe yourself as open, approachable, and sincere?

CHAPTER 3: BEING VISIONARY

• Are you intellectually curious? Would you describe yourself as having broad interests?
• What do you read? Do you spend sufficient time reading professional journals and/or articles about trends and developments in business, science, and society? To what extent can you translate or apply those trends into your daily healthcare leadership roles?
• Are you able to analyze data and statistics and understand their broad implications?
• How often do you visit with people from other industries and walks of life to hear about their work and learn from their perspectives?

CHAPTER 4: COMMUNICATING VISION

• How effectively do you balance working on day-to-day challenges with developing longer-term strategies?
• To what extent can you develop compelling arguments for change? How persuasive are you?
• How well can you distill and condense a strategic vision into something that can easily be communicated?
CHAPTER 5: EARNING LOYALTY AND TRUST

• What is your do-say ratio—the number of times you actually do what you say you will do? Would others agree with your analysis of yourself?
• Would others say that you are concerned about their needs and affairs?
• Are you passionate about follow-through, particularly when it comes to getting back to others on their questions and concerns?
• Do you lead by example? Do you help out on routine jobs when you can? Are you a roll-up-the-sleeves person? How easily can others access you when they need you?

CHAPTER 6: LISTENING LIKE YOU MEAN IT

• Are you approachable? (Ask yourself this question again.)
• Do you typically understand where others are coming from? To what extent do you care about their concerns?
• To what extent can you get to the heart of someone’s verbal message to you?
• How open are your channels of communication? Do you have multiple informal and formal channels of communications and ways to discern what is happening in your organization?

CHAPTER 7: GIVING FEEDBACK

• How clear and direct is your communication style?
• How well do your direct reports understand their performance goals? Do they have a clear understanding of their performance appraisals, or do they feel blindsided after an evaluation?
• How disciplined are you in providing feedback regularly?
• How well-balanced is your feedback (positive and negative)?
CHAPTER 8: MENTORING OTHERS

• How firmly do you believe in career development? Do you have former staff who have gone on to higher-level positions?
• Would others describe you as a boss who regularly provides them with stretch assignments and opportunities to work outside their area of accountability or to gain exposure at higher levels of the organization?
• How supportive are you of others’ needs to attend educational programs? Have you encouraged subordinates to earn advanced degrees?
• How often do you provide “teaching moments”—brief, informal, and unplanned explanations during the workday about a situation or event at hand?

CHAPTER 9: DEVELOPING TEAMS

• How well do you support the concept of “teaming” (as contrasted to dealing with people on a one-on-one basis)?
• Do you encourage cohesiveness by identifying common vision, goals, and threats among team members or by establishing team rules?
• What steps do you take to prevent small, subgroup cliques; team role ambiguity; and emotions from driving debate?
• Are your team members clear on their mutual accountability to one another?

CHAPTER 10: ENERGIZING STAFF

• How often do you show personal energy and enthusiasm about your work and your achievements?
• Would others describe you as goal driven and passionate about achievements and accomplishments?
• Do you regularly use humor, wit, and levity in the workplace?
• How often do you make a point of recognizing the accomplishments of others and celebrating their achievements?

CHAPTER 11: GENERATING INFORMAL POWER

• Are you frequently sought out by people (besides direct reports) for your opinions?
• How strong are your informal networks? How well-informed do you feel through these networks?
• How openly do you share information?
• If others do favors for you, how conscientious are you in reciprocating?

CHAPTER 12: BUILDING CONSENSUS

• How knowledgeable are you about group decision-making techniques (e.g., NGT, parking lot, brainstorming, affinity mapping)? How comfortable are you with using them?
• How effectively do you make use of agendas, outlines, handouts and the like when managing a meeting?
• How regularly do you provide opportunities for all group members to voice their thoughts and opinions during meetings? How effectively do you reach out to members who are visibly silent?

CHAPTER 13: MAKING DECISIONS

• How well do you know what drives your decision making? To what extent are ethics, values, goals, facts, alternatives, and judgment incorporated into your decision-making processes?
• To what extent are you able to analyze and evaluate choices and make the best choice? Do you have a method for weighing various alternatives?
• How knowledgeable are you about decision-making tools (e.g., force field analysis, cost-benefit analysis, decision trees)? How comfortable are you with using them?
• When making decisions, do you hear out opposing viewpoints, or do you tend to focus on developing arguments in favor of your own viewpoint?

CHAPTER 14: DRIVING RESULTS

• How effectively do you keep people focused and on task?
• If team members are derailing movement toward an objective, how comfortable are you with stepping in to take action?
• How regularly can you set a higher bar for your team’s performance and help others to see it as an achievable goal?

CHAPTER 15: STIMULATING CREATIVITY

• Do you have one primary style of leadership? If so, in what situations might this style be less useful?
• How often do you pause before an important interchange (e.g., meeting, negotiation session) to think reflectively about the situation and people involved?
• To what extent do you have the ability to read and assess the environment and to develop a leadership style of action that is appropriate to fit that environment?

CHAPTER 16: CULTIVATING ADAPTABILITY

• How comfortable are you with leading people to look at problems with fresh eyes?
• When the people you work with seem stuck in a rut, what kinds of approaches do you use to break them out of it?
• How often do you come up with new initiatives or solutions to problems that bring people together in new ways?