

INTERVIEW WITH LESLIE PRATCH, AUTHOR OF LOOKS GOOD ON PAPER?

"Effective leaders are likely to act with consistently high integrity and to demonstrate sound, timely judgment when they occupy positions of power.... But every executive is unique ... the most striking differences ... are in their underlying motivations and their coping tendencies." –Leslie Pratch

The following is an interview with Leslie Pratch, author of Looks Good on Paper?: Using In-Depth Personality Assessment to Predict Leadership Performance (Columbia University Press)

Question: How did you first become involved in the role you play for companies now—evaluating candidates for leadership positions?

Leslie Pratch: I have been evaluating candidates for leadership positions for more than 15 years. But I didn't get to this spot by accident; creating the tools and building the capability to do this was something I pursued for many years across multiple universities and graduate degrees.

First, I was a graduate student in psychology. As a graduate student, I had the chance to help set up a talent program for high potential professionals at Arthur Andersen. For my Ph.D. dissertation, I researched if it were possible to predict the emergence of leaders in a high performing group, using a psychological approach I was developing. It turned out that it was possible. After graduate school, I worked with State Farm on the development of a competency framework for the whole organization. That led me to the development of my own competency framework, which I use in my work today with my clients. I also got an MBA, after I had begun evaluating executives, to give me better tools to understand the issues my clients and their candidates face.

Q: How does holding an MBA help you in your work?

LP: Having a strong understanding of business allows me to understand at a sophisticated level what my clients are trying to do with their companies and investments. I can understand and think critically about the investment thesis, understand the strategy of the firm, and see the implications of all of that for the job that will be ahead for the candidates I'm evaluating. Having a strong understanding of business lets me be a business discussion partner as well as a skilled psychologist.

Q: Why do you continue to track candidates for months and years after they have secured the position they were being considered for?

LP: These are long-term jobs. The usual investment horizon for my clients is three to five years, and most public company boards give top managers some time before deciding whether a new CEO is a success (with rare, glaring exceptions when someone is clearly failing). Since I am not predicting how a candidate will perform on a specific task, but rather how the candidate will handle the complex job of leading an organization over time, we have to let time pass to see what happens.

Q: What are some common mistakes employers make when considering candidates for leadership roles?

LP: There are several. For example, a very common belief is that past performance is the best predictor of future performance. But all that past performance shows is that the person was able to do what was demanded in the past; it says nothing about what the person could do with new challenges.

Another is not defining well enough what a company is looking for. You need to know the challenges that the person is going to have to deal with. Many investors do not have experience leading the sort of company they have invested in, and so they lack a feel for the challenges of dealing with the rest of the management team, customers, and even, yes, the other investors.

A third example is hiring someone who looks like me. People like people they can communicate easily with, and feel that a common background reduces uncertainty about who this other person is. Which is not an effective way to choose leaders.

Q: What is active coping, as you define it for business leaders?

LP: Active coping is being ready and able to adapt creatively and effectively to challenges and change. Active copers continually strive to achieve personal aims and overcome difficulties, rather than passively retreat from or be overwhelmed by frustration. They move towards the problems and opportunities with open arms and open minds.

Q: Is active coping something that can be learned, or must you either have it ... or not?

LP: Active coping is something that is learned over a lifetime. It is something that someone can get better at, but the improvement process is slow, incremental, and mostly internal. It means learning much more about the ways you've learned to protect yourself from what you fear—by retreating, by lashing out, by neurotically doing X—and then choosing to abandon those techniques because there's a better approach available.

Q: How did you isolate active coping as the “difference maker” in leaders?

LP: Everyone notes how the world is changing faster than ever. It occurred to me that organizations might need leaders who had strengths in coping with change. That, to me, didn't seem like a skill as much as an orientation to the world—to see change as an opportunity rather than as a threat. For people to see change as an opportunity, they need to be simultaneously stable and open to change. People who are active copers have this balance of stability and openness to change, and that's why active coping is "the difference maker."

Q: What are some examples of leaders in business (or elsewhere) of people who seem to have excellent active coping skills? What about the opposite?

LP: It's hard to tell from people's public personas or even from their actions, but I'm willing to hazard a guess about people whose public image seems consistent with active coping.

Nelson Mandela decided to get smart rather than get angry when imprisoned. He learned Afrikaans to be able to understand the oppressors. He kept his eye on his goal and was willing to switch tactics, embrace opponents, invent new forms of interaction, and generally do what it took to move forward. And he did it all with style, charm, and balance.

Jim Lovell, who commanded Apollo 13. While the safe return from space was clearly a group win, the crew was a key part of the response. "We were given the situation," Lovell explained, "to really exercise our skills, and our talents to take a situation which was almost certainly catastrophic, and come home safely. That's why I thought that 13, of all the flights—including [Apollo] 11—that 13 exemplified a real test pilot's flight."

In the world of business, Jim Collins put together his list of the 10 greatest CEOs. Although he wasn't looking necessarily for active copers, one of his choices was [Kathryn Graham](#), a terrific active copper. As chief of the Washington Post, she considered the risks of publishing the Pentagon Papers, the leaked Defense Department study that revealed government deceptions about the war in Vietnam. If the Post published, it risked being prosecuted for theft of government secrets, which, in turn, could doom its pending public stock offering and other businesses. Graham wrote, "I would be risking the whole company on this decision." Nonetheless, she approved publishing and the Post still had an extremely successful IPO.

For non-active copers, we can certainly start with plenty of executives who appear to have a narcissistic personality. I won't name names, but a quick Google search for "narcissists" and "CEOs" will show where other people have made the link. Why are they not active copers? If you're a narcissist, you lack empathy. You are not seeing the reality of the world: you're seeing the world filtered through your view of yourself as the grandiose center of the world, assuming that whatever action you take will be praiseworthy.

Q: You write in the book that women leaders need to be even better at active coping than men to be seen as effective in their roles. Why is this?

LP: Because a female leader faces certain higher barriers to reaching any goal than a male leader does, and active coping is about overcoming barriers to goals. Specifically, a woman will have a harder time getting and keeping followers than a man will.

Here's why: A woman's followers will have mixed thoughts about her when she is strong and directive, and mixed thoughts about her when she is collaborative and interested in others. A man's followers, on the other hand, will laud him for being strong and directive, and give him a pass when he is collaborative and interested in others. It's not fair, but it's reality.

A female leader trying to achieve the same goal from the same starting point as a male leader has a harder task, simply because of this tangle of attitudes, which stem from typical expectations about men, women, and leaders. As a result, a woman needs to be a better active copper than her male counterpart would be.

Q: How can someone tell if they are an active copper, a passive copper, or neither? Are there a few telltale behaviors?

LP: You can tell by how they behave in an unexpected crisis. If during a crisis, you see someone who remains open to the people around her, listens to bad as well as good news, doesn't take unfair advantage of others, and remains actively aware of her own motivations, strengths and shortcomings, you are looking at an active copper.

In a crisis, a passive copper will be prudently hoping that the problem goes away, or trying to do what he or she did before in vaguely similar circumstances.

Q: If you'd like to improve your active coping, what are a few things to keep in mind?

LP: There are several, but some of the most important are:

Know what you want. Can you define what it is you want to achieve? Are your goals realistic or are they grandiose? Are they specific or are they nebulous?

Recognize sources of threats or frustration. What in the outside world is preventing you from getting what you want? What inside you is preventing you from achieving what you want?

Possess the psychological freedom to act. Can you actually take the action that is in your own best interest, not the action that feels easiest?

Be ready to deal with resistance and overcome threats. How prepared are you to tackle obstacles that may hinder the execution of your plans? When stressed, do you retreat into yourself or lash out at others?

Pursue what you really want in a way that is consistent with your values and ideals. You'll feel confident if you pursue goals that are realistically within your grasp—but high enough to stretch you.

Q: Why should organizations seek out active copers as leaders?

LP: Business should seek out active copers to be leaders because businesses cannot reliably predict the future. Unexpected events (positive or negative) occur, for which no playbook has been written. An active copers does not lose his or her footing in such cases, but rather thrives on the opportunity to seek out information about what is happening, rally the right team, and learn as part of the process of steering towards success.

Leaders with other personalities and styles may do as well in circumstances that can be predicted in advance, but active copers are the best people to have in place when the unexpected occurs.

Q: What are some ways in life outside of the office that active coping can be helpful?

LP: Active coping is helpful wherever it's not likely that everything will go as planned—that is to say, everywhere and anywhere. Active copers experience each twist and turn in life—even unavoidable losses such as deaths of close relatives or their own impending death—as an opportunity as well as a loss.

With each new moment, active copers ask: What can I learn from this event? How can I use this event to strengthen my commitment to the ideals that I pursue? What's really happening now, and what is the healthiest response that I can make?