Among chief executives today two distinct styles of leadership predominate—each with characteristic strengths and weaknesses that have significant ramifications for company performance in various business situations.

Our firm conducted research involving more than 20,000 senior executives—including more than 1,600 CEOs—across a wide range of industries around the world. In the course of the research we identified eight statistically distinct leadership styles or “signatures” (See sidebar “The Eight Leadership Signatures”).

Each style has strengths and weaknesses, but no one style is “right” or “wrong” and all styles can be equally effective. Individuals tend to have some degree of access to all the styles, and self-aware or
A well-coached executive can learn to flex to additional styles when appropriate. The challenge arises when leaders continue to resort to a style less suitable under changed conditions.

On average, CEOs in our research scored highest on Forecaster attributes, followed by Provider attributes. Chief executives scored lowest on Composer attributes, which is not surprising given that Composers tend to prefer working independently. What is perhaps surprising is that the Pilot style—strategic and visionary—ranks only sixth for CEOs.

**Forecasts first and foremost**

No other group of executives, including other C-suite executives, scored as high on Forecaster attributes as CEOs. If you favor the Forecaster style, you likely exhibit the characteristics of a “learning leader”—continually gathering data, expanding your knowledge (often into disparate fields), and enhancing your subject-matter expertise. You like to have ample time to think deeply, amass information, and reflect on what you've learned. You harness that knowledge to formulate insights about future trends and consider how various strategies might impact the business.

Forecasts thrive in environments where people like to be led by leaders with new ideas and intellectual capital or in firms where deep subject matter expertise is highly valued. Forecasters also excel in innovative organizations that benefit from more thoughtful strategic insights into future trends. And they are likely to do well in circumstances where there's opportunity to create and evolve products and processes.

Forecasters may struggle where executing on short-term results matters more than idea generation and developing intellectual capital. They may also strain in static environments where tradition reigns and the appetite for strategic change is limited. And because Forecasters understand the dangers of proceeding with limited data, they find that environments where they're asked to provide immediate input in new or unfamiliar topics can be highly stressful.

"Savvy leaders know that different business situations—a start-up, a turnaround, a merger, growth, or new competitive pressures—call for different strengths."

The Forecaster style also comes with potential blind spots, but you can take care to compensate for them. For instance your reliance on ideas and rational argument can sometimes come at the expense of connecting emotionally with people you are trying to influence. When engaging with stakeholders to
win buy-in, try to focus on emotional, as well as analytical, persuasion. The most authentic way to do this is to identify a few key relationships you can strengthen that, over time, will give you more relationship capital and the benefit of the doubt when key decisions are on the line.

Similarly, your deep understanding of the facts, figures, and data supporting your ideas could lead you to become overly wedded to your own thinking. Challenge yourself to bring your customary intellectual rigor to truly understanding alternatives. And when you agree, however reluctantly, on a course of action you initially opposed, let go of your doubts and bring the force of your intellect to bear on the new direction.

As someone who prefers to be on firm ground before acting, you may also struggle when having to make tough choices outside your area of expertise or when you feel inadequately informed. In those situations you will need to challenge yourself to act more decisively and stretch your tolerance for risk. For example, ask yourself, “would more information actually improve the quality of my decision?” Otherwise, opportunities, and possibly the competition, could pass you by while you wait for more data.

**The dual motivations of Providers**

CEOs also scored higher on Provider attributes than did other members of the C-suite. If you are a Provider, you are likely motivated by two different yet equally strong forces—the desire to lead from the front and to take care of those around you. You tend to believe that your method or manner of doing things will continue to generate results and thus are motivated to impart it to others. You are also deeply loyal and committed to those around you, and you operate with a sense of conviction—all characteristics that can be very appealing to followers.

Such Providers typically thrive in situations where people want a leader who sets a clear and deliberate path for them to follow. But, in keeping with the dual nature of Providers’ motivations, they also do well where others want to be part of a group and the Provider can proactively shape the environment, as in organizations with a relatively young work force. Entrepreneurial environments, where a clearly defined point of view is required and where people need to see conviction in their leaders, also welcome the Provider style.

But Providers sometimes struggle in environments where their personal vision and perspective will be regularly challenged. For instance a new CEO from outside the company may assume leadership of an executive team populated largely by established company veterans who will test the new leader’s
credibility, especially if the previous CEO was popular and successful. Providers may also struggle in situations that require a wider diversity of individuals who can build on one another’s ideas.

Providers, too, have blind spots that require attention. Your compassion and listening skills may make your colleagues feel heard, but they may find it quite hard to actually convince you to alter your perspective. To compensate, you can challenge yourself to experiment with new ideas or approaches to see how they may augment your existing approach. This goes beyond thinking about new ideas—actually changing how you do things is the real test.

While you care deeply about providing for others, your relationships may feel somewhat one-dimensional to colleagues—more student–teacher than peer-to-peer. Find opportunities to share more of yourself—your background and your thinking—to let those around you experience your authenticity.

Your focus on higher-level strategy and relationship building may come at the expense of an interest in day-to-day operations and executional details. Be sure to build processes and support systems around you (perhaps with the aid of a colleague who is a Harmonizer or Producer) that can keep you on top of detailed execution.

**Producers and Collaborators**

For the third-highest leadership style, CEOs scored about equally on Producer and Collaborator attributes.

If you are a Producer, you typically value tangible and immediate results. With a strong temperament and work ethic, you also value consistency and hard work and you believe in paying one’s dues. You are skilled at building efficient structures and processes that enable reliable execution. But you also favor proven approaches that you know work.

Producers tend to thrive in stable environments, where significant buy-in from others isn’t required to get things done, such as in traditional industrial or manufacturing settings, or the military. They also shine in organizations that have undergone significant (and perhaps unsettling change) and require a leader who can focus on keeping things running smoothly. But they may struggle in organizations that require major change, where subtle influencing skills and flexibility are at a premium, or in strong cultures of creativity and innovation.

If you are a Collaborator, you are likely perceptive about others’ needs. You take a team–first approach to leadership and share credit for success. You support and develop other leaders by placing them in
positions where they can excel. And you're good at attracting talent—people want to work with you. You thrive in environments where followers require the leadership of someone with whom they have a relationship. But in situations where bold direction and engaging personal presence are required to influence key stakeholders—for example, when a big shift in strategy must occur swiftly but the requisite changes run against the company’s prevailing mind-set—you may need to adopt a more assertive style.

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This hardly exhausts all of the leadership styles and possible combinations of leadership styles that are open to CEOs who are willing to flex according to the context. Too often, leaders are advised to adopt a unitary style that theoretically encompasses some timeless truths about leadership. Savvy leaders, however, know that different business situations—a start-up, a turnaround, a merger, growth, or new competitive pressures—call for different strengths. They know also that every strength runs the risk of a corresponding weakness. And instead of simply accepting themselves as they are, they try to work to be able to rise to every occasion—providing the right kind of leadership at the right time.

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