STYLE · CHARACTER

The Person in Front of You

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PETERSEN LEADERSHIP | PERSPECTIVES

Why Great Leaders Observe, Understand, and Adapt

Three employees hear the same announcement: a difficult project must be finished by Friday. One asks, “What result do you need?” Another asks for the underlying data. A third asks how the deadline will affect the team. The leader sees three responses to one assignment. The temptation is to apply three labels: a fast mover, a careful thinker, and a relationship builder.

Those labels may be useful starting points. They become dangerous when the leader mistakes a visible behavior for a complete understanding of the person. Asking for data does not necessarily mean someone fears mistakes. Challenging an idea does not necessarily mean someone needs to win. Remaining quiet does not necessarily mean someone agrees.

The first responsibility of leadership is not to read people quickly. It is to understand them accurately enough to lead them well.

The difference between observation and assumption

We regularly interpret the behavior of others through the lens of our own experiences, expectations, and preferences. Social psychologist Lee Ross (1977) described the “fundamental attribution error”: the tendency to overemphasize personal characteristics and overlook situational influences when explaining someone else’s behavior. The practical leadership implication is straightforward: what we see is evidence, but it is not always the explanation.

Consider an employee who pushes back immediately in a meeting. A hurried leader may conclude, “He is argumentative.” A more thoughtful leader asks whether he has spotted a genuine risk, is protecting a client, is reacting to an earlier broken promise, or simply needs to think aloud. The behavior is observable; the motivation remains a hypothesis until we learn more.

People also behave differently across situations. Mischel and Shoda (1995) explained how individuals can show recognizable patterns that nevertheless depend on the circumstances they encounter. A person who decides rapidly within an area of expertise may be cautious about an unfamiliar ethical or financial question. Someone who speaks easily with a trusted colleague may say little in a room where dissent has previously carried a price.

The lesson is not to abandon behavioral patterns. It is to use them as **questions to investigate, not verdicts to announce.**

Three intelligences and the judgment to use them

My approach to leadership has long emphasized three complementary capacities: cognitive intelligence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), and adaptability (AQ). These are practical lenses for leadership, not a claim that a three-letter formula can measure the whole person.

IQ helps us understand the situation. What are the facts? What is actually happening? Which assumptions are unsupported? What does performance, timing, or risk require? A capable leader resists reaching a conclusion from one interaction or one convenient story.

EQ helps us understand the human experience. What pressures, hopes, fears, values, and relationships may be influencing the response? How is the leader's own tone affecting the conversation? Emotional intelligence is not merely being pleasant. It requires listening, self-awareness, and the courage to address difficult issues with respect.

AQ helps us adjust our approach. Does this person need a concise statement of the objective, time to review evidence, an opportunity to discuss a concern, or permission to test a small first step? Adaptability means choosing an approach that makes success more likely rather than insisting everyone respond to our preferred style.

Judgment integrates all three. We must decide which adjustment is appropriate, when it is justified, and where flexibility must end. If IQ asks what is true, EQ asks what matters to the person, and AQ asks what I should change, judgment asks what serves the individual, the team, and the mission together.

A five-step discipline for leading the individual

1. Observe: separate what happened from what you inferred

Notice specific words, actions, timing, and patterns. "She asked four questions about the timetable" is an observation. "She is resisting the change" is an interpretation. In a coaching conversation, the distinction protects us from building a solution around a mistaken diagnosis.

2. Inquire: replace certainty with curiosity

Ask an open question before deciding what the behavior means: "What concerns you most?" "Which information would change your decision?" "What am I missing?" "How would you prefer to work through this?" Then listen without immediately defending your position. Research reviewing workplace listening finds associations with trust, relationship quality, and constructive outcomes (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022).

3. Adapt: change the method, not the mission

A leader can give one colleague a clear destination and discretion over the route, another a written brief before discussion, and a third an opportunity to raise concerns privately. These are different paths to a common standard. Adaptation should make the work clearer and the

relationship stronger; it should not create favoritism or excuse poor performance.

4. Align: agree on expectations and accountability

Clarity is a form of respect. Before the conversation ends, define the outcome, authority, constraints, timing, and next checkpoint. A fast mover may need to slow down for a safety review. A deliberate thinker may need a decision deadline. A person who wants to help everyone may need explicit priorities and permission to say no. Empathy and accountability are not opposites.

5. Reassess: learn whether the adjustment worked

Do not assume that one good conversation solved the problem. Ask, “Did this approach help?” “What still stands in the way?” “What should we do differently next time?” Reassessment is where leadership adaptability becomes a learning discipline rather than a one-time act of kindness.

From visible behavior to better leadership questions

A practical way to use behavioral cues is to pair each cue with at least one alternative explanation, a question, and an appropriate response. The following examples are prompts for inquiry, not personality diagnoses.

What you see	Ask before concluding	Possible leadership adjustment
Rapid challenge to an idea	“What risk or opportunity are you seeing?”	Hear the challenge, test the evidence, then make the decision.
Silence during a meeting	“Would you rather think this through and follow up?”	Offer a private or written channel; do not equate silence with consent.
Repeated requests for detail	“Which unknowns could change the outcome?”	Share the essential facts early and set a clear decision point.
Says yes to every request	“What would need to come off your plate?”	Reset priorities and support appropriate boundaries.

Before diagnosing the person, examine the culture

There is a more difficult question leaders must ask: **What if the behavior I am observing is partly a response to the environment I have created?** If employees stop disagreeing, perhaps the organization has taught them that speaking up is costly. If every minor decision comes back to the boss, perhaps earlier attempts at initiative were punished. If someone

appears overly cautious, perhaps the last mistake was treated as a character flaw rather than an opportunity to learn.

Amy Edmondson's study of work teams linked psychological safety with learning behavior (1999). Research by Detert and Burris (2007) further found that managerial openness was associated with employees' willingness to offer improvement-oriented suggestions, with psychological safety playing a mediating role. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) found that leader inclusiveness mattered for psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams. These studies do not give leaders a license to avoid hard decisions. They point to a responsibility to make candor possible.

My earliest lessons came aboard Navy submarines, where commanding officers established very different human climates even while meeting the same demanding mission standards. I learned that attention to people and insistence on performance must reinforce each other.

I saw that principle tested when I took responsibility for a struggling Florida district at a financial services company. Advisors and staff had become discouraged; some dreaded coming to work, and departures had eroded confidence. Rather than assume I knew why, I spoke with the people doing the work and listened for what they needed. We adopted "Fun First, Business Second," not to diminish client service or production expectations, but to restore energy and trust. I gave our administrative team room to organize recognition, birthdays, anniversaries, and celebrations of shared success. At the same time, I coached advisors directly, including joining client appointments, and kept expectations clear. People could contribute in different ways without being asked to become copies of the leader.

Relationships, recruiting, and performance improved. Over time, our growth outpaced historically strong districts, and we achieved record-setting results. Those outcomes were not the result of fun alone; they emerged from a culture that combined respect, initiative, accountability, and shared purpose.

This is one of the central ideas in my forthcoming book, *The Culture We Create*. Culture is not simply how people behave when the leader is present. It is what they have learned is safe, expected, rewarded, and tolerated when the leader is not in the room. A leader must understand individuals and also take responsibility for the conditions that shape their behavior.

The limits of adaptation

Adaptive leadership is sometimes misunderstood as giving everyone whatever they want. That is not leadership. A leader may adjust how information is delivered, how input is gathered, or how autonomy is granted. A leader must still safeguard ethics, quality, deadlines, safety, and the commitments made to others.

Treating people fairly does not require treating them identically. It requires making decisions for defensible reasons, communicating expectations consistently, and giving people reasonable opportunities to succeed. The practical test is whether an adaptation strengthens performance

and trust without shifting an unfair burden onto colleagues.

There is also a boundary to what observation can tell us. Leaders should not use a short conversation, a graphic, or an informal “type” to diagnose mental health, infer personal history, or assign a permanent identity. When an employee says what support would help, the leader should take that answer more seriously than a label.

Five questions to ask yourself this week

1. Observe: What did I actually see or hear, and what motive did I assume without checking?
2. Inquire: What question would help me understand this person and the situation better?
3. Adapt: What change in my approach could make success more likely?
4. Align: Have we agreed on the desired result, responsibilities, boundaries, and timing?
5. Reassess: What evidence will show whether this approach improved trust and performance?

The leadership test

The best leaders are not simply those who can identify someone’s “type” within five minutes. They stay curious long enough to discover what they do not yet know, and they are disciplined enough to act on what they learn.

When we look at the person in front of us, we should see more than speed, caution, or sociability. We should see a capable human being operating within a particular situation, bringing individual strengths and concerns, and responding in part to the culture around them.

The greatest test of a leader’s emotional intelligence may not be how well we understand people who think like us, but how effectively we lead people who think differently. That requires understanding, adaptation, accountability, and judgment. Ultimately, the goal is not to make everyone more like the leader. It is to help each person contribute their best to a shared purpose.

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Author's note: The IQ–EQ–AQ framing and the five-step Observe–Inquire–Adapt–Align–Reassess discipline are Petersen's applied leadership framework, not a standardized personality assessment or clinically validated diagnostic instrument.