

Interactive Leadership

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InterActive Leadership is a powerful approach to leadership development based on rigorous quantitative psychological research and neuroscience. It was developed and has evolved over the past 40 years by David McClelland and David Burnham, building upon the work of Henry Murray and Abraham Maslow at Harvard. Essentially, McClelland and Burnham studied the stable, pre-conscious thought patterns that drive most of our behavior. They identified the thought patterns that statistically predict superior leader performance, and used neuroscience to enable leaders to surface and change their own thought patterns, in order to change how they influence as leaders.

Starting in the 1930's at Harvard, Henry Murray built on Freud's theory of the unconscious and identified 300 different thought patterns, termed "implicit motives" since they are just under the surface of consciousness. McClelland and Burnham then found that 80% of the global population was dominant in only three of these motives. By observing thousands of subjects, they determined that one's dominant motive changes how one views the world, what one pays attention to, and how one acts, with high predictability. They were also able to develop a scoring system that enabled them to diagnose a person's implicit motive patterns with over 80-90% accuracy.

McClelland and Burnham wanted to understand how motive patterns related to performance in different jobs, and studied entrepreneurs, politicians, diplomats, teachers, safety officers, mortgage brokers, organizational leaders, and others. It turned out that implicit motive patterns do predict top performance in these jobs, and they developed a training program for entrepreneurs to help them develop the thought patterns that would predict top performance. McClelland writes extensively about this work in [*The Achieving Society*](#).

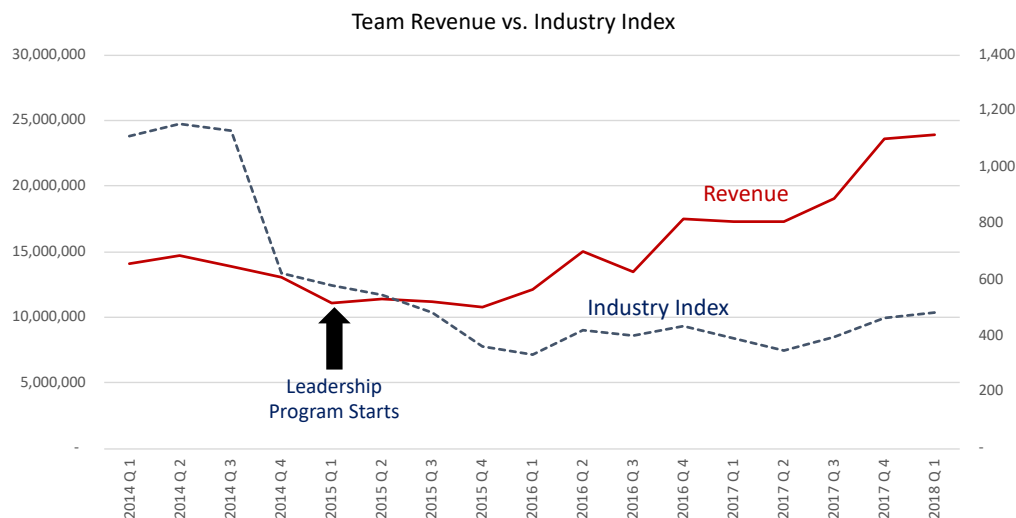
In the 1970's, Harvard Business School was interested in understanding what predicted corporate performance over time. When McClelland and Burnham were asked to study the Fortune 500 CEO's to look for predictive patterns, they were astonished to find that over 90% of consistently top-performing CEO's had the same implicit motives. They modified the entrepreneur training course and started training organizational leaders to help them identify their own thought patterns and change them, should they want, to the patterns that predict top performance. Between 65-85% of the participants in each training cohort were able to improve their performance, and sustain that improvement, for years after taking the class. McClelland and Burnham wrote about their findings in the Harvard Business Review article [*Power is the Great Motivator*](#). This is a great article, but it's important to keep reading because **the findings from this 1970's study are out of date.**

In fact, with the advent of the internet, diversity in the workforce, and societal changes starting around the 1990's, McClelland and Burnham saw that the pattern might be shifting. CEO's who had consistently performed at a top level were moving towards the average. So they ran the study again and gathered performance data for 12 years. They found that indeed, the pattern had shifted to one they call InterActive Leadership, which reflects many of the thoughts and behaviors we read about in current leadership literature: non-hierarchical decision-making, collaboration and partnership, focus on purpose, emotional intelligence, learning from mistakes, and appreciating complexity.

David Burnham revamped the course once more to reflect the new research, and it has been offered over a thousand times globally to tens of thousands of leaders. The program consists of a psychometric to determine the leader's motive patterns, a 3-day workshop, and 4 hours

of subsequent 1-on-1 coaching sessions. Depending on the cohesiveness of the participants as an intact team, and the degree to which they apply the technique in their daily work, 65-85% of participants improve their performance persistently (this is significantly higher than similar behavioral leadership training programs). David Burnham writes about his more recent study in [*Inside the Mind of the Word Class Leader*](#).

One Publicis.Sapient cohort which remained intact for over three years post InterActive Leadership training showed a remarkable improvement in financial performance that continued to increase over time, a common finding with leaders who are able to internalize the changes in thinking.



To give a sense of how InterActive Leadership differs from other forms of leadership, it's compared to "traditional" leadership, similar to what McClelland and Burnham observed in their HBR article about 1970's and 80's leaders:

Traditional Leadership	InterActive Leadership
I influence you	We influence each other
People need me	We need each other
I must provide answers	We don't need to know all the answers
I must set direction	The group must set direction
I must be certain	The group must be flexible and manage paradox
Provide vision	Co-create and share purpose
Direct others skillfully	Strive for mutuality
Make decisions	Share decision-making with others

People often wonder why, if this approach is so powerful, they have never heard of it before. One reason is the level of skill and infrastructure required to offer the training. Facilitators have to become highly skilled in “coding” participants’ thought patterns in real time, and navigating what is fundamentally a process of psychological change. It can take years to be able to facilitate at the level required to get the results described above. In fact, this type of motive training was once used for alcoholics, with a tremendously high success rate compared to standard treatment. But it was eventually discontinued because it was considered too expensive.

As a participant, experiencing the training is fundamentally different from a typical behavioral change program. You are offered an opportunity to see how you are really (i.e. implicitly) thinking about a situation, and that can be threatening to some people. But the payoff comes when leaders have a moment of insight and can see a path of change that has evaded them for years. This is what makes being part of the program such an honor - the way it has the capacity to profoundly change peoples’ lives.