

PAMELA PARK

## Gold Star vs North Star Leaders: Two Paths to High Impact Leadership

I had just wrapped up a presentation at Harvard Business School when a female MBA student raised her hand with a pained expression on her face.

*“I’ve been here for two years and I’m still not sure of the answer to this question – what’s the best way to become a leader? In one class, we’re taught to get to the top through power and influence. And in another class, we’re taught to be visionary leaders. Which one is it?”*

Either, I say. But to know which path works best for you, ask the questions that really matter: Why do you want to lead? What kind of impact do you want to have as a leader?

### Two Core Archetypes: Gold Star vs North Star Leaders

Despite the value of leadership to most organizations, there’s an ongoing misdiagnosis on the types of leaders required to drive impact. Leadership is increasingly important as we face complex global challenges such as climate change, cybersecurity, and the reemergence of China. Yet leaders who can tackle these hard problems don’t always know how to self-diagnose their leadership style or maximize their impact.

In my study on high impact leaders, I found two core archetypes of leaders – what I call a Gold Star Leader and a North Star Leader. Both are successful and make an impact on the world, but why they do it and their career strategies differ. Both types of leaders are needed to create and build innovative, industry-shaking organizations.

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## Gold Star Leaders: General Managers Seeking *Broad* Impact

Gold Star Leaders seek broad impact. They want to help as many as possible in society by driving change from positions of power. They gain authority by excelling and rising in influential institutions, like military generals earning their gold stars.

Gold Star Leaders are typically corporate CEOs, COOs, and General Managers with strong political skills and operational chops. They are strategic thinkers who can navigate complex environments and bring structure to rapidly growing orgs. One example of a Gold Star Leader is Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg. Like Sandberg, Gold Star leaders tend to be polished, pedigreed, and deft at handling social status and power dynamics.

As leaders, Gold Stars focus on building enterprise value and foster cultures that prize collaboration and consistency in execution; they are typically best suited for mid-size to large organizations with more established rules and processes. Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt who [“wrote the book on adult supervision”](#) is another example of a Gold Star Leader in the tech sector.

## North Star Leaders: Problem Solvers Seeking *Deep* Impact

By contrast, North Star Leaders seek deep impact. They want to drive change by solving a very specific problem, like climate change, by digging deeper to get to ground truth. They orient around this North Star issue and gain expertise by learning all angles of the problem; they rise to leadership by building community around their unique solution to the problem.

North Star Leaders are typically founder/CEOs and thought leaders who are visionaries with a drive for knowledge. They are first principles thinkers who challenge convention, break through commonly held assumptions, and pioneer new approaches that others may not see. North Star leaders tend to be more resilient in their unconventional quest, buffered from external influence by their strong focus on their North Star problem.

As leaders, North Stars prefer to control product quality and trust other North Stars. They gravitate towards cultures that value autonomy and innovation and are well suited to lead new initiatives. SpaceX and Tesla CEO Elon Musk is an example of a highly effective North Star leader with his focus on making humans a multi-planetary species through space technology and sustainable energy.

Each star archetype has an Achilles heel. While magnetic and disciplined, Gold Star Leaders tend to possess limited moonshot thinking because they are bound to existing institutions. While visionary, North Star Leaders can encounter difficulty scaling orgs because of their priority focus on product and lofty standards for talent.

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## Career Strategies

A leader's star archetype results in distinct career strategies. Most leadership advice is geared towards Gold Star Leaders in established corporate environments (e.g. Lean In, get a sponsor, navigate politics, etc.). North Star Leaders must avoid the trap of traditional leadership advice and instead look for organic ways of building community and pioneering their own voice around their ideas and solutions.

The first step is awareness and diagnosis; in particular, my research shows most North Star Leaders are not aware that they are a North Star. Misdiagnosis of a leader's star archetype can lead to frustration and missed opportunity.

Executives can have a mix of both Gold Star and North Star skills but tend to start as one archetype. Maximizing a leader's respective star takes self-awareness, learning agility, and disciplined practice. Absent that hard work, executive team misunderstandings between North Star and Gold Star Leaders can produce friction, high turnover, and organizational demise.

With the right diagnosis and development, Gold Stars and North Star Leaders can join forces effectively. Examples of high impact partnerships include Google's CEO Eric Schmidt with co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin as well as SpaceX's COO Gwynne Shotwell with CEO Elon Musk. This understanding can empower both North Star and Gold Star Leaders to take on and solve complex problems and scale solutions to impact the world.

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