

Leading Mindfully in a Strange New World

A CONVERSATION WITH RICK BREDEN

CEO OF BEHAVIORAL ESSENTIALS & LEADER IN ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY



The uncertainty of our new normal has many of us struggling to find meaning and to move with purpose through our days. We at RS&S have been actively engaged with our many zoo and aquarium clients and friends over the past several weeks, witnessing in real time the differences in zoo leadership and their varied approaches to managing the current crisis.

This experience led us to revisit the **AZA Leadership Gap Analysis** we recently developed in partnership with Rick Breden and his team at Behavioral Essentials (BE). Through an ongoing strategic partnership between RS&S and BE, we work to help clients build critical leadership capabilities through an integrated process of right-fit hiring informed by BE's behavioral analytics data, together with ongoing coaching and consulting.

In late 2019, BE in partnership with RS&S evaluated an initial sample of ~15 zoo executives and compared them to their "**Top Performer**" benchmark, which was created with executives whose companies' performance (both for-profit and not-for-profit) met or exceeded expectations of revenue and profitability over a 10-year period or more.

BE's research identified 6 behavioral scales integral to the success of these **dynamic, high-performance executives: Proactivity, Dominance, Endurance, Aggression, Creativity and Criticality.**

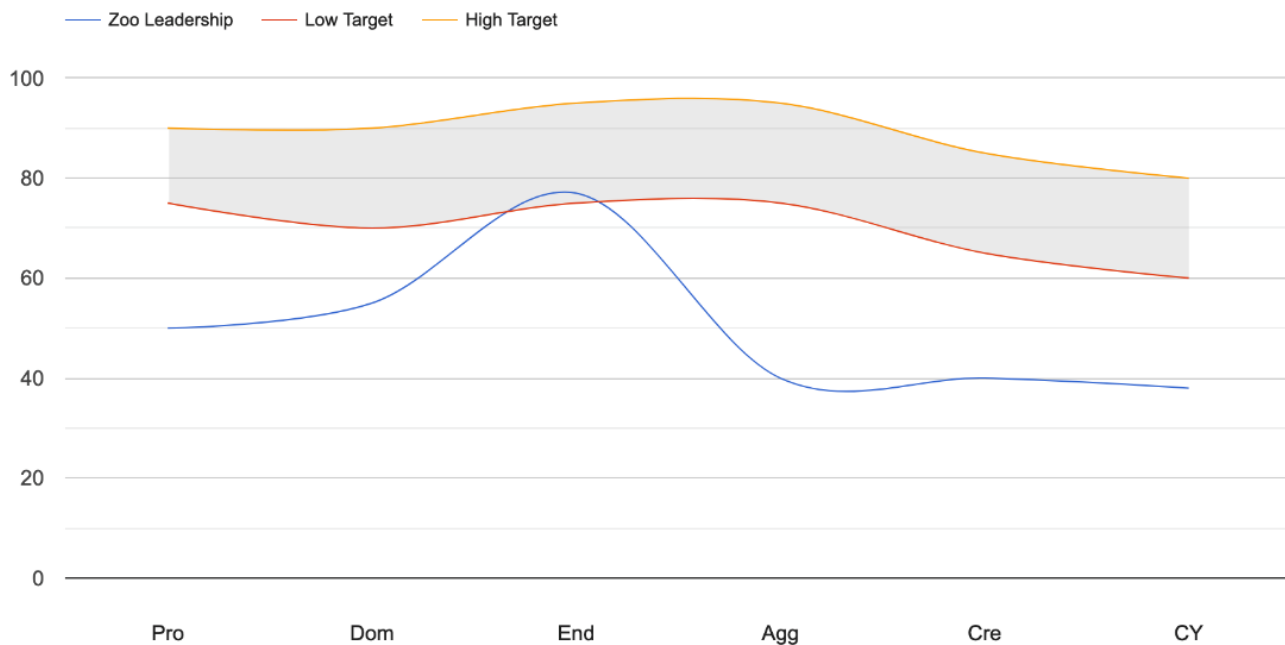
Our thorough evaluation of the zoo executive sampling indicated **significant gaps in 5 of the 6 key behavioral areas** - all but endurance - when compared to executives from other industries.

These behavioral areas involve such traits as **work ethic, drive, a "take charge" attitude, a sense of urgency, curiosity, willingness to try new things, and an ability to fully understand and mitigate risk.**

OUR FINDINGS ARE SUMMARIZED IN THE CHART BELOW



Zoo Leadership
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Zoo Gap Analysis



SCALE	ZOO LEADERSHIP	LOW TARGET	HIGH TARGET
Proactivity	50	75	90
Dominance	55	70	90
Endurance	77	75	95
Aggression	40	75	95
Creativity	40	65	85
Criticality	38	60	80

Given the demands of the current crisis, our concerns about the leadership gap were top of mind during a recent discussion with Rick Breden about how to support zoo and aquarium leaders in successfully guiding their teams, inspiring confidence and taking decisive action to meet the challenges before us. Rick's insights provided a useful framework in which to consider the issues that impact positive leadership.



Grieve the Old Normal

This current crisis pulled the rug out from underneath us. Seemingly overnight, **everything changed**; we've lost our regular routines and in-person connections. People we know have been stricken, our institutions are closed, our plans are shattered, and the worries are mounting. And we don't know when it will end and how we'll get back to normal.

What we are going through is like a death. We are **mourning** what we have lost – both physically and spiritually. The **stages of grief** will pay us all a visit in one way or another with denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance jockeying for position in our psyches, gaining and falling back on each other in a painful cycle. Acknowledging what we are feeling, together with the understanding that grieving is not a linear progression, will help us process the situation and equip us to provide support for others.

Understand What We are Experiencing and Why

People tend to respond to traumatic situations in one of 3 ways: fight, flight or freeze. These **unconscious stress responses** determine how we react to perceived danger.

Fighters act decisively, aggressively even, wanting to take command and see results.

The **flight** instinct reveals itself in restlessness, moving from one thing to the next haphazardly and without purpose.

Powerlessness is a key component of the **freeze** instinct, resulting in a paralysis of fear.

The way leaders react to the threats we are experiencing will have significant impacts on those around us. For instance, leaders who compartmentalize their feelings in their determination to get things done (fight reflex), they may fail to recognize what others are feeling. Others might send out mixed/ conflicting signals in their communications to staff (flight reflex), causing further uncertainty. And still others may be crippled by indecision (freeze reflex).

Understanding our own reactions to this stressful situation can help us understand how others are coping and enable us to build partnerships leveraging each other's strengths to answer questions, make good decisions and **create our new business model for moving forward**.

Put Your Own Oxygen Mask on First

Leading from a place of fear, panic or frustration seldom results in good decisions. Those feelings are not who we are or how we lead successfully. Regaining equilibrium and getting back to our core self – the one who built the team and set the strategic direction – are essential components to **leading from a place of personal strength**. This will better equip us to show compassion and understanding to our staff as we encourage them to keep moving forward with the acknowledgement that each new day brings its challenges.

Daily self-care, with quiet time for thinking and meditation, helps to ground us in the here and now. Prioritizing our wellness and that of those around us by establishing a **game plan for the day** empowers us to orient ourselves and our work in a positive, productive direction. Click [here](#) for the 6 questions Rick recommends we ask ourselves each morning and take some time to visit

<https://www.behavioralessentials.com/resources/> to access a wealth of additional resources that promote wellness and provide ideas to consider and actions to take in our personal and professional lives that promote inner strength, clarity and a sense of purpose.

This is indeed a strange new world right now with so much uncertainty and so many things out of our control. **Strong leadership has never been so important!** Through our partnership with Behavioral Essentials, we focus on bolstering zoo leadership with strategic counsel informed by research-driven data. Working together to nurture and develop solid leadership skills across AZA institutions, we will keep **moving forward** - as always, **better together**.

