

## Natural Born Leaders: Use of a Self-Assessment Tool and Benefits to Coaching and Development

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Why do people sometimes use the phrase “natural born leader” when describing some leaders? This paper explores born leadership – the myth, the persona of people viewed to be born leaders, and the conclusions from peer reviewed research of the subject and application for leader development. Use of a Self-assessment tool (Blank, 1994) is proposed to determine where people are cognitively on 108 “Born Leader” skills. Furthermore, it is proposed that the results from the tool can benefit human resource departments in evaluating options for consulting, coaching and development.

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**M**any leadership researchers have weighed in on natural born leadership but surprisingly there is very little literature that fully explores this theory. This is surprising because society from all appearances tends to identify some leaders as natural born leaders. Blank (2001) is one leadership researcher who has explored the idea of born leadership and states society wants to believe in natural born leaders as it fulfills a romantic need for heroes. Perhaps this is one reason why the term is used but when evidence appears to be there, it is hard for society to think otherwise.

The natural born leader notion is hard to discount. When people demonstrate dramatic initiative, when they easily figure out what needs to be done, and when they effectively influence others, we assume they are born to lead. (Blank, 2001, p. 7). Blank (2001) also notes these leadership skills appear to be innate skills and can be illustrated by the child on the playground who organizes the lunch break games or gets the other children to do things. Is there any evidence to back the theory of born leadership? Is there any way to trigger those innate leadership capacities in people and develop them to help them become born leaders? This paper will explore these questions and break down the ideas of Blank (2001) and others to find application to human resource development.

Yukl (2010) in reviewing the trait approach to the study of leadership noted this approach emphasized attributes such as personality, motives, values, and skills and the underlying

assumption of this approach was “some are natural leaders, endowed with certain traits not possessed by other people” (p. 13). The trait approach to study was most extensive during the 1930s and 1940s and did show connections between traits (attributes) and leadership success, however there were counter examples too.

Dewey (1916) used language as an example of how heredity and environmental factors can play into triggering certain attributes. For example, if someone has no vocal cords to articulate sounds nor any auditory or other sense-receptors and if they had no connectors between the two sets, Dewey (1916) argues it would be a waste of time to try and teach that person to converse. If certain attributes are not there, it is a waste of time to try and develop them. However, if they are, an “important step is to furnish an environment which will adequately function whatever activities are present” (Dewey, 1916, p.87)

If individual attributes can be tied to leader behavior (Yukl, 2010) and if those native or natural aptitudes are present as an initial step toward furnishing an environment (Dewey, 1916), then perhaps culture may also play a role in getting to the root of born leader qualities. Senge (2006) notes our traditional view of leaders are grounded in an individualistic and nonsystematic worldview. For instance, in Western cultures such as ours in the United States, “leaders are heroes – great men (and very occasionally women) who ‘rise to the fore’ in times of crisis. So long as such myths prevail, they reinforce a focus on short-term events and charismatic heroes rather than on systematic forces and collective learning” (p. 320).

Personal desire and cognitive ability also have a role in determination of whether someone has the aptitude to lead. Jaques’ (1992) Stratified Systems Theory (SST) identified seven levels of mental complexity and posited people naturally rise to the highest level they are comfortable with. An example of a person at strategic level I would be someone who has direct judgment of something. It could be illustrated as a Dad playing catch with his son. He throws the ball to his son who determines to catch the ball. The son then determines to throw the ball back to his Dad. Someone at strategic level VII is looking at strategic options; alternative routes to make or transform operating systems and these would include Presidents, CEO or even Mob bosses. The controversial part of this is the working capacity (WC) of an individual. Jaques and Clement (1991) posited that to have work stretches one’s capabilities and enables people to learn and grow; it creates opportunities for release and redirection of our natural flow of energy and initiative. They proposed the natural initiative theory which states “it is the prime duty of good managerial leadership to provide the conditions that release people’s full and enthusiastic initiative and creativeness into their work” (p. 71).

In triggering aptitudes or in looking at cognitive power, the negative of this can be narcissism. Steyrer (2002) noted narcissism goes hand in hand with the leaders’ striving for power (House, 1988) and attribution of charisma to a leader correlates to the leader’s level of narcissism. Citing the work of Sigmund Freud, Steyrer (2002) notes “triumphant satisfaction is always felt when something within the ego coincides with the ego-ideal. If, however, there is pronounced gap between the two, this implies a state of depression, guilt and inferiority” (p. 244). This is important to the discussion of born leadership in that some may feel they are born leaders due to their ego, but they may also come to the realization they will not become the leaders they believe they should be during those gaps where the ego does not coincide with the ego ideal. The

depression piece of this also ties back to Jaques (1992) as a person will not be content until they have reached strategic level of competence.

Citing the work of Jung and von Franz (1964), Jacobi (1965) and Singer (1972), King and Nicol (1999) noted,

[T]he need to reconnect to the Self is instinctual; hence, the effort to do so occurs either consciously or unconsciously. In order to find one's unique path, it is necessary to become aware of the various unconscious aspects of the Self. It is through the discovery, affirmation and integration of these aspects that individuals gradually move toward a higher sense of individuality. (King & Nicol, 1999, p. 3).

King and Nicol also note Jaques' framework acknowledges individual growth by not only accommodating it, but also encouraging it. "Organizations will be enhanced if individuals, who value their work, are provided the freedom to actualize their full potential" (King & Nicol, 1999, p. 4). The take-away from this and our connection to Human Resource Development (HRD) is: Individuals will seek those opportunities to be fully challenged by work they value and managers or leaders over them will be able to determine how much of a person's potential can actually be applied to work.

### **Skills of "Natural Born Leaders"**

According to Blank (2001), no one is genetically programmed to be a leader. Blank believes some people are given the label "because they effortlessly, spontaneously, consistently, and frequently demonstrate the specific skills that cause others to willingly follow" (p. 8). Blank (2001) notes an innate behavioral aptitude or temperament does not guarantee those things will be actualized. So even if there are some innate characteristics of leadership within an individual, they won't manifest themselves unless something draws them out. And when they do reveal themselves, Blank's (2001) argument is an individual will be like a natural born leader in the eyes of others.

Blank (2001) identifies three major categories of skills common to what people believe are born leader-like skills. The first category is Foundational Skills and this category includes three skill sets: Expand self-awareness; Build rapport; and, Clarify expectations. The foundational skills provide the firm footing for the other skill set categories and to have more impact and be more effective as a leader. This category with its three skill-sets contains 35 skills (behaviors) as shown in Figure 1.

Foundational Skills

**Expand Self-awareness**

- 1. Get quiet and listen
- 2. Live with passion and direct it with precision
- 3. Achieve success over stress
- 4. Leverage time
- 5. Juggle professional and personal demands
- 6. Remain flexible in the face of difficulty
- 7. Use failure as a growth tool
- 8. Focus on lifelong learning
- 9. Seek 360-degree feedback
- 10. Use your whole brain
- 11. Know your personality gene code
- 12. Be an ocean

**Build Rapport**

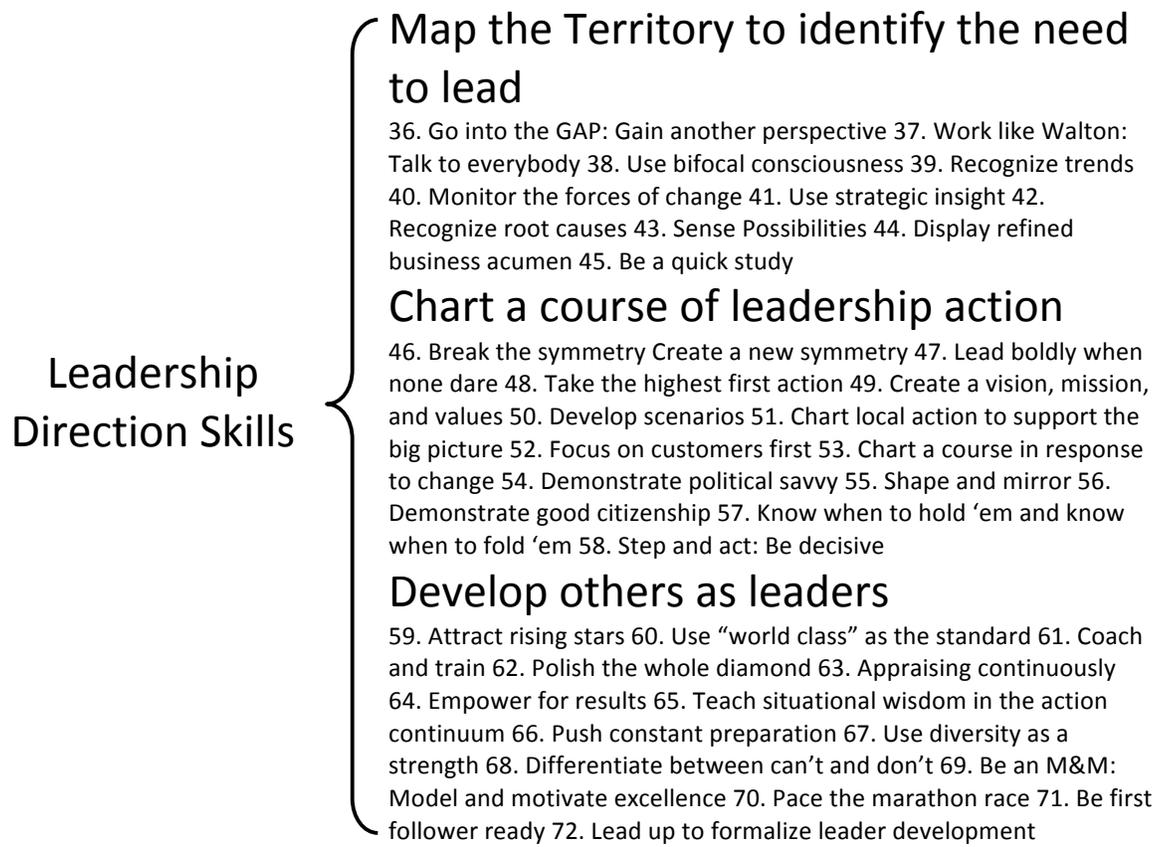
- 13. Establish common ground
- 14. Walk in another’s shoes
- 15. Listen with active ears
- 16. Be accessible and approachable
- 17. Develop remote leadership capacity
- 18. Size people up
- 19. Apply the platinum rule
- 20. Tune in to MMFG-AM
- 21. Display a sense of humor
- 22. Demonstrate rock-solid integrity
- 23. Build trust

**Clarify Expectations**

- 24. Establish mutually agreed-on expectations
- 25. Root out limiting expectations
- 26. Explain organizational expectations
- 27. Use fact-based thinking
- 28. Name the game
- 29. Work the grapevine
- 30. “Network” your expectations
- 31. Unravel rumors
- 32. Clarify the action-results connection
- 33. Display unsinkable optimism
- 34. Throw light on organizational shadows
- 35. Expect the unexpected

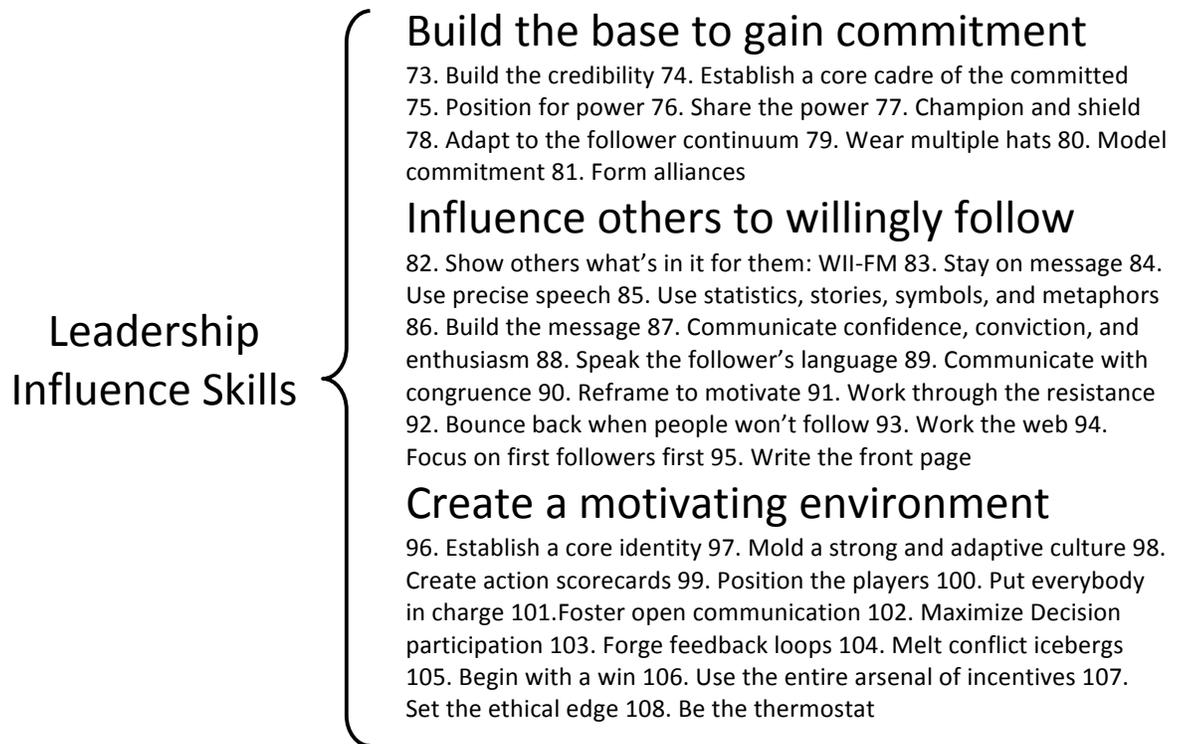
*Figure 1.* Foundational skills category showing three skill sets and the 35 natural born leader skills

The second category is the Leadership Direction Skills and this category has three skill sets: Map the territory to identify the need to lead; Chart a course of leadership action; and, develop others as leaders. This second category of skills is all about leading through uncertainty, developing other leaders and mapping the terrain. The three skill-sets in this category contain 36 natural skills as shown in Figure 2.



*Figure 2.* Leadership direction skills category showing three skill sets and the 36 natural born leader skills

The third and final category is Leadership Influence Skills. The three skill sets associated with this category according to Blank (2001) include: Build the base to gain commitment; Influence others to willingly follow; and, Create a motivating environment. The Leadership Influence Skills category captures those skills that enable a leader to get others to willingly follow. Exceptional leaders will be able gain commitment instead of relying on command and compliance (Blank, 2001). This category and its three skill-sets contain 35 natural skills as shown in Figure 3.



*Figure 3.* Leadership influence skills category showing three skill sets and the 35 natural born leader skills

Blank (2001) posits the people we label as natural born leaders are those who have mastered these 108 identifiable skills. Blank calls this the portrait of a natural born leader but notes each portrait will be different as some will have heavier brushstrokes than others. Mastery is achieved in skill areas important to specific circumstances. One example cited by Blank (2001) is in the area of motivation. When a motivating environment creates greater success, those who skillfully foster more open communication and participative decision making are perceived to be natural born leaders. (Blank, 2001, pp. 11-12).

Thus, a person, though they may possess innate qualities included in the 108 identifiable skills, won't be viewed as a natural born leader by others unless opportunities present themselves to trigger the skills. The term "born leader" can have a negative impact on some as they may believe since others are "born leaders" then they can never become one. The point Blank (2001) is trying to make is, "everyone has a natural born capacity to lead because it is natural for people to respond to nurture...and ... an innate ability to learn and grow" (p. 10). Blank posits there is some mix of nature and nurture that defines where a person is now and adds anyone can understand, practice and master the skills.

### Method

This study proposes to use the Self-Assessment tool (Blank, 2001) used to determine where an individual is – their starting point – with regard to the 108 skills identified in Figures 1-3. The Self-Assessment tool is made up of 54 questions spanning the three skill sets in each of the three categories. Each question is rated using a six-point Likert-type scale where one (1) is very

strongly disagree and six (6) is very strongly agree. The instrument, though used often, has not been formally validated. Regarding the lack of validation, Blank states,

Regarding the assessment, it has not been psychometrically verified according to established standards. I did collect data from about 250 training course participants from a variety of different government agencies over the course of about 18 months and then lost all the information in computer meltdown. I also collected data from 90 participants from a single organization. I only calculated average scores. A 90 person sample would not be enough to do an adequate factor analysis on the survey. (Blank Correspondence with Lew Steinhoff, 4/8/2014)

Given this Self-Assessment tool has been widely used by the developer during executive level classroom-type instruction and given it is face valid, the results are expected to show Chronbach's alpha numbers  $> .70$  and Pearson Correlation coefficients approaching 1. Thus, the Blank Self -Assessment Tool should be a reliable tool for identifying leadership skills for development. The Self-Assessment will be a validated and reliable means for determining current skill competencies but will not be able to determine whether someone is a natural born leader. Because the Self-Assessment tool is based on the personal judgments of the participants, it will be able to be used as a means for determining skills to be considered for development.

### **Discussion**

The results will display averages and correlations and will provide important data relating to where participants currently are cognitively with respect to the 108 skills defining a "born leader." Therefore it will be instrumental in helping to define HRD requirements. Additionally, it can be valuable to consultants and coaches of leadership. For example, a consultant can be a staff or support person in an organization who plans, recommends, assists, or advises (Block, 2011) but a consultant can also be a person brought in from outside to advise or provide an assessment. Consultants have no direct authority and are thus dependent on line managers for producing results (Block, 2011). Often the manager is too busy to know the true state of developmental needs of their employees but through a consultant using the Self-assessment tool, the manager can know where each employee is and can identify potential leaders.

The Self-assessment tool can be a good tool for coaching too. By understanding where an individual is cognitively with respect to certain leadership skills, the coach can direct energy toward those areas needing the most development. The coach can also assess the starting point and encourage further development while remaining cognizant of the employee's abilities. A coach influences and "influence is born of a partnership rather than a parenting orientation to the world" (Block, 2011, p. 190). So with an assessment tool like Blank's Self-assessment, the coach can use a collaborative tactic which Yukl (2010) determined through three studies using survey questionnaires or descriptions of influence incidences, to be more down and lateral than up in directional use and was used with other tactics (Yukl, 2010, p. 179).

The Self-Assessment is constructed to inform the participant on what they already suspect to be true about themselves. Therefore, development of skills where lower scores appear should be voluntary but encouraged. A self-directed learning approach would weed out those serious about developing their skills from those not serious. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) posit "this form of

learning can take place both inside and outside institutionally based learning programs. For the most part, however, being self-directed in one’s learning is a natural part of adult life” (p. 293). They note there are three types of self-directed models: linear, interactive, and instructional.

An HRD model for an organization that has administered the Self-Assessment to its employees might look similar to the one shown in Figure 4. Figure 4 shows a model containing three learning modules corresponding to the Self-Assessment Skill Categories and their corresponding Skill Sets. The learner would select the module they wanted to work on, determine the method of training delivery (linear, interactive or instructional) and could be encouraged to take advantage of use of a coach or mentor. Once completed, results would be recorded in the HRD records. A practicum would follow to include placement in a job of their choice where the newly developed leadership skills could be tested in real application. Thus proficiency level within the Skill Categories would assist in internal hiring decisions and reorganizations, but would also ensure skill development is continuing. It would stand to reason then, those who want to pursue development would and those who don’t would not. Thus, by default, “natural born leaders” would emerge. The perception by others of these leaders as “natural born leaders” would manifest itself through voluntarily and willingly following of the leader.

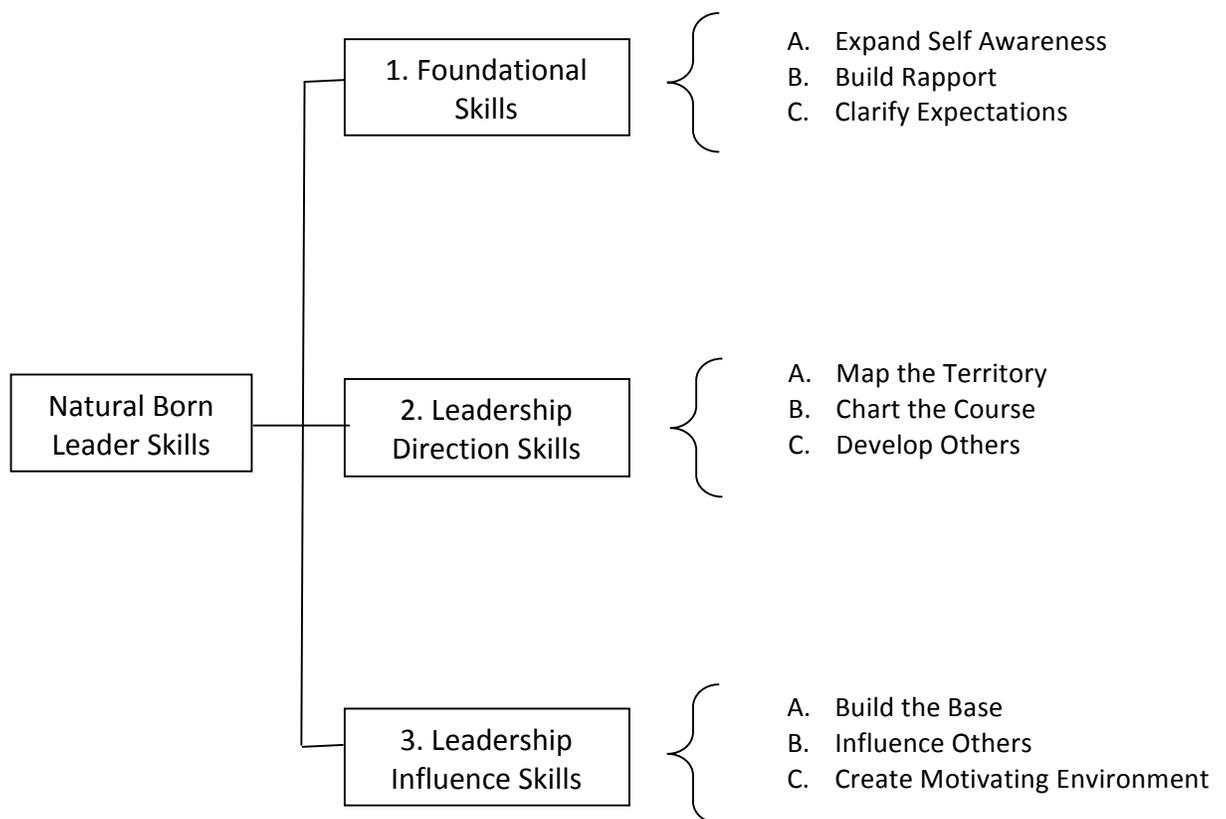


Figure 4. Self-Directed Learning Modules.

## Conclusion

Leadership scholars have for many decades concluded there is no such thing as a natural born leader. This study has not proved, nor did it set out to prove, otherwise. However, if a tool such as the Self-Assessment tool developed by Blank (2001) is validated and utilized by HRD practitioners to develop content for training and development where the result is more leaders perceived to be “natural born leaders,” then it can be argued that these skills are learnable. High scores would indicate mastery of the skill that will enhance the capacity for continued effectiveness in taking the lead and gaining willing followers.

This tool fails to identify triggers of innate qualities leading to natural born leader reactions but does offer a first step in verifying the skills that enable people to lead. The field of literature is very light on this area of study which is probably due to the dismissal of the possibility of natural born leadership. I believe the time might be ripe for reopening the debate on natural born leadership and for looking at psychological assessment tools, managerial assessment tools and even tools to assess cognitive abilities or capabilities in children.

Another possible area for further research is in the related area of nature versus nurture. If these skills do describe what people have to do well to be labeled “naturals,” then the next step might be to identify the what and where behind skill mastery; that is to identify what innate capacities are more likely to translate into leader mastery and why and what aspects of innate capacity have to be effectively nurtured to blossom.

The Self-assessment tool is simple to administer and the results are conducive to obtaining a quick look at where individuals are cognitively with respect to leadership skills. A self-learning module approach to human resource developmental material will sift the serious ones from the not-so-serious individuals and enable human resources to match positions with people and the training necessary to further equip individuals for those positions. The Self-assessment tool will be an instrument available to consultants and coaches to help them target their focus of concentration when working with individuals and groups.

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### About the Author

Mr. Lew Steinhoff is acting director, Office of Leadership and Career Management (OLCM) at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA). As such, he establishes and maintains strategic partnerships with the NNSA Program Organizations through leadership consultants and builds collaborations with outside leadership development programs such as those offered through the National Defense University, the Air Force and Navy War Colleges, and Sandia’s Weapons Intern Program. Prior to his current position, Mr. Steinhoff had a diversified portfolio as an engineer spanning more than two decades supporting the nuclear security enterprise.

Mr. Steinhoff has a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Old Dominion University, a Master of Engineering Management from George Washington University, and is presently working toward a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership at Regent University. He has published several technical papers and has begun the publication process on leadership relevant papers. In his spare time, Mr. Steinhoff has written and published four children’s books.

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