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# Aspiring Immigrant Leaders Face UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Coaching immigrants for leadership

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Immigrant professionals in the United States face unique challenges in their pursuit of leadership roles. Despite contributing significantly to the workforce (immigrants made up 18.6 percent of the U.S. workforce in 2023), immigrants remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Only 36.1 percent of the immigrant population was in management, professional, and related roles vs. 45.4 percent of native-born workers.

Immigrant professionals often encounter unique structural and cultural barriers that hinder their career growth, including anxiety over immigration status, limited job mobility and job security due to visa constraints, and reluctance to voice workplace concerns for fear of negative repercussions. These obstacles challenge aspiring immigrant leaders to navigate unfamiliar workplace dynamics while developing leadership skills.

Executive coaching demographics do not mirror the growing diversity of the management workforce, making it essential for coaches to understand the unique challenges that aspiring immigrant leaders face. These challenges, such as expressing their identity, navigating authority, negotiating fair pay and balancing work-life priorities, are informed by deeply ingrained cultural and childhood experiences.

By recognizing these challenges, executive coaches can develop more effective strategies to support immigrant leaders in developing essential leadership skills.

Coaching strategies must account for the cultural, social and psychological factors that shape an immigrant professional's mindset. Through literature review, coaching practice and our own journeys as immigrants, we identified three key influences.

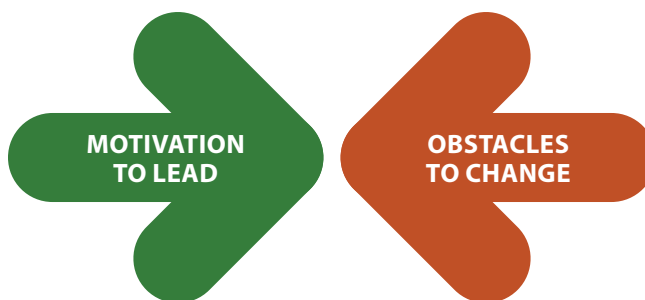
- 1 Socio-cultural environment,
- 2 Family dynamics,
- 3 Individual predisposition.

These affect two critical factors – motivation to lead (MTL) and obstacles to change (OTC) – which in turn shape leadership mindset. Looking at coaching as a growth and change process that operates in the context of an imbalance between these two oppositional forces, we developed a conceptual framework and assessment tool for coaches to measure the dimensions of each factor.

We have developed the Immigrant Leadership Mindset Assessment Tool (ILLUMINANT) to help coaches identify, assess and cultivate leadership potential in immigrant professionals by targeting mindset. This assessment tool<sup>1</sup> is available for free on our Open Science Foundation (OSF) resource page.

## Figure 1: MTL & OTC

A model of the growth and change process in the development of a leadership mindset as the interplay between MTL and OTC.



## MINDSET MATTERS

Key aspects of the immigrant mindset that relate to the common themes and challenges noted above are:

- Relationship to authority
- Tolerance for risk
- Acceptability of self-expression and dissent
- Motivation to lead
- Obstacles to change

These in turn have their roots in three causal determinants:

- 1 Individual predisposition.
- 2 Micro-social environment, represented by family of origin dynamics.
- 3 Macro-social environment, represented by sociocultural factors.

In Figure 2, we illustrate how these causal determinants influence intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which both contribute to MTL.

Focusing on two primary constructs, MTL and OTC, allows coaches to address key factors influencing leadership development when coaching across racial differences. MTL reflects an individual's motivation to pursue leadership, extending beyond cognitive ability and personality to capture deeper personal and sociocultural influences.

In contrast, OTC represent internal barriers that hinder leadership growth, particularly for immigrant professionals who must navigate cultural expectations, workplace norms, and personal identity conflicts. Prior research (described in the original paper <sup>2</sup>) shows that MTL and OTC are associated with leadership potential and development.

We propose that the key to understanding long-term leadership motivation is by mapping the original MTL dimensions – affective, social-normative and non-calculational – to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is driven by a desire for autonomy, competence and relatedness (ACR), as described by Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory, which Nizzero<sup>3</sup> relates to coaching competencies.

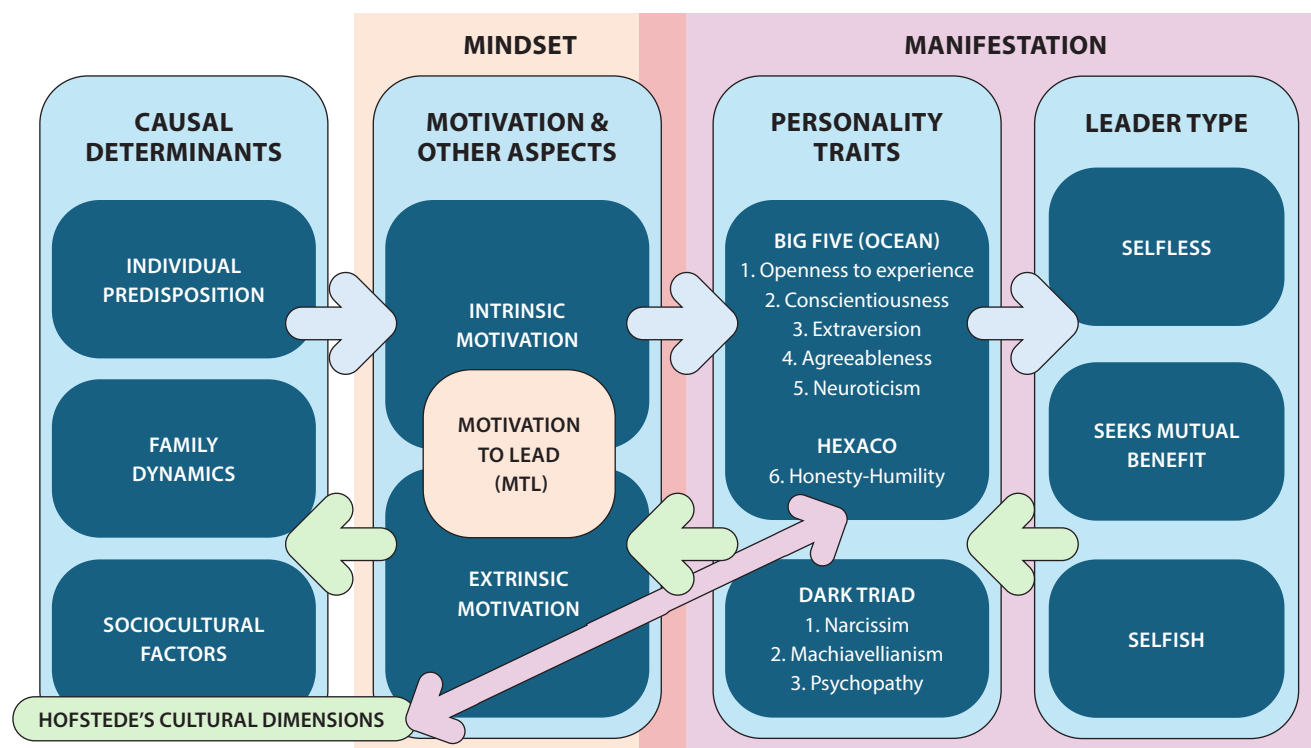
ACR-supportive environments nurture an internal drive for leadership, whereas non-supportive environments may not. Immigrant clients' motivations are further influenced by sociocultural factors, including acculturation levels and cultural dimensions. For example, some South Asian immigrants may pursue leadership for status and prestige (extrinsic motivation) due to familial or cultural pressure, even if they do not inherently enjoy the role's challenges.

Coaching that assesses the dimensional strengths of an immigrant individual's motivations to lead, and the obstacles to change they are facing, can help identify high-potential leaders and effectively tailor coaching strategies.

Additionally, by considering whether clients are first- or second-generation immigrants, coaches can better determine whether

## Figure 2: Mindset & Manifestation

A process map showing the relationship between micro- and macro-social environments and their effect on motivation, leading to the development of personality traits that influence the type of leader the person becomes.





family dynamics or sociocultural factors play a more dominant role in shaping their development as leaders.

## DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

The process map in Figure 2 indicates that adopting a structured approach to assessing MTL and OTC in immigrant clients can help identify potential leaders and also provide valuable insight into developmental areas. We have created a question bank with scored assessment questions and follow-up coaching questions that coaches can use to evaluate key factors influencing leadership development, including intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, family and sociocultural influences, risk tolerance and conformity patterns.

By classifying clients based on their dimensions of motivation and obstacles to change, coaches can develop personalized strategies to unlock leadership potential.

Coaches can assign the ILLUMINANT assessment to clients ahead of a coaching session and use the scores to form a preliminary evaluation of the respondent's leadership potential. They can then use the suggested open-ended coaching questions in session to refine their evaluation and use it as a guide to facilitate growth of the client's leadership skills. For instance, a respondent who scores highly for intrinsic motivation and obstacles to change may be a good candidate for leadership but might require significant coaching assistance.

ILLUMINANT offers a tailored, value-neutral approach that respects each client's unique background and goals. Coaches can use the assessment to infer variations in family dynamics and accul-

turation experiences, for example between first- and second-generation immigrants, to ensure interventions work effectively for different sub-groups.

To effectively use ILLUMINANT, coaches are provided with a user guide that explains the rationale for the assessment as well as scoring and interpretation of the results. To implement this tool effectively, coaches should:

- **Establish Trust:** Build rapport and a safe space for honest discussions before introducing the assessment.
- **Follow up with open-ended questions:** Integrate the coaching questions provided into conversations after the client has completed the scored assessment to uncover blind spots and deepen understanding. Coaches must recognize and respect the diverse backgrounds of their clients, adapting their questioning style and communication approach to align with cultural nuances.
- **Individualize coaching plans:** Create flexible, client-centered coaching strategies that incorporate progressive goal setting using recommendations based on the provided scoring system in order to foster long-term leadership growth.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHING PRACTICE

This framework also applies to other coaching goals beyond leadership. Effective coaching engagements will benefit from examining the client's motivations to grow and obstacles to change.

While the framework and concepts are useful to enhance our understanding of clients, they are not intended to impede the natural flow of a coaching conversation that builds a partnership of equals by emphasizing our shared human experience.

Our emphasis on understanding the client's individual predisposition, family dynamics, and socio-cultural environment helps coaches meet clients where they are to uncover their potential.

When we view each client as a unique manifestation of our shared humanity, we can better support our clients in transforming their challenges into opportunities for personal and professional development.

This study introduces a structured framework for assessing and supporting aspiring immigrant leaders through coaching. By integrating theories of motivation, family dynamics, and socio-cultural influences, the ILLUMINANT assessment tool provides coaches with a practical method for identifying leadership potential and overcoming obstacles to change. This approach ensures that coaching remains culturally informed, adaptable and aligned with the unique needs of immigrant professionals.

By fostering a deeper understanding of immigrant leadership challenges, this framework contributes to more equitable and effective leadership development strategies in an increasingly diverse workforce •

### NOTES

- 1 Subramaniam, S. and Raghavan, M., "Coaching Immigrant Leaders: The ILLUMINANT Tool," [osf.io/uf6tkn](https://osf.io/uf6tkn)
- 2 S. Subramaniam, "Coaching immigrant leaders: motivation to lead and obstacles to change," *PsyArXiv* (2024). [osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/db74r\\_v5](https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/db74r_v5), [doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/db74r\\_v5](https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/db74r_v5)
- 3 Nizzero, "Autonomy, Competence & Relatedness," *choice Magazine*, V21N4 (2024).

# COACHING QUESTIONS

- 1 In what ways do you gain personal fulfillment from taking on a leadership position?
- 2 What are the most satisfying aspects of external rewards and recognition that a leadership position provides you?
- 3 Which of your important personal values does a leadership position support and which ones does it challenge?
- 4 What experiences at home supported your capacity to make informed and uncoerced decisions?
- 5 What experiences at school and in social or cultural groups (e.g., clubs) supported you in feeling capable and effective in your activities?
- 6 In what ways do you think a leadership position will change the quantity and quality of your relationships with others in the organization?