When studying leaders, there are many qualities I admire and view as contributors to success. Grit – the passionate dedication to an overarching goal despite setbacks and challenges (Duckworth and Gross pg. 1), and optimism – the tendency to expect positive outcomes and focus on what’s in your control while taking necessary actions (Positive Psychology Center, Resilience Skill Set), are two of these qualities. If I had to choose between a leader with relatively greater grit and another with relatively greater optimism, I would need to gather more information. Since grit and optimism are both important traits of a good leader, I would need to dig into their leadership decisions, particularly the ways in which they motivate employees, the culture they create, and the ways that their grit and optimism impact their organizations’ success in order to choose one.

In choosing a leader, it would be important to investigate the decisions they make regarding how to lead. I believe that the best way to do this would be to learn from current or past employees through interviews with willing individuals. One of an executive’s primary responsibilities is minimizing organizational strain by balancing the availability and demand of incentives, which are the opportunities, perks, or resources that serve to entice someone to exert effort in a desired way (Wilson pg. 1-2). The way that a leader does this and the types of incentives they use can be very impactful on the culture they create at their organization. A good leader should be able to manage the incentives inventory to effectively motivate workers without having to resort to coercive incentives, at least in most cases.

Of course, good leaders are strategic. They are going to make decisions that they feel will be in their best interests; using game theory to reason backwards and try to create the best possible outcome for their organization (Dixit and Nalebuff: Part 1 pg. 58). However, I would be curious if they work solely in their own best interests or if they also work to serve the best interests of their employees. I would want to know, for example, if they are more frequently using deterrence instead of compellence or threats instead of promises to get workers to do as they wish (Dixit and Nalebuff: Part 2 pg. 185). This would suggest to me that they have difficulty motivating workers and need to resort to fear of punishment to make sure the job gets done.

Along with grit or optimism, I would choose a leader who has a keen awareness and understanding of the way people work and what they need, and uses this awareness to thoughtfully help their workers. Knowing that we all possess instinctual biases, a good leader might offset these by setting frequent goals to avoid loss aversion, using algorithms to avoid errors, and setting risk policies to guide workers with procedures to handle common problems (Kahneman Part 4 pg. 340). By knowing that too much choice can at times can lead to poor decision-making, a good leader might help by creating an environment that encourages and supports good decisions (Donaker and Luca pg. 2). What I would look out for and hope not to find, however, are manipulations that take advantage of instinctual tendencies but do not benefit the employees, as these are signs of an immoral system (Gino pg. 4).

The core responsibilities of an executive do not fluctuate from one organization to the next, as they would for say a manager (Week One Lecture 45:27). Therefore my choice would not be determined by the type of enterprise, but by the individual’s leadership skills. As stated, executives have the important job of managing incentives; motivating and inspiring their workers. A particularly optimistic leader or a particularly gritty leader could be equally successful in doing so. It is possible that there are certain advantages to either trait in different situations. For example, in a setting like the American foster care system, it might be beneficial to be extra gritty because of challenges such as decreasing federal funding but increased performance measurement (Padot pg. 151). This is not to say that optimism would not be beneficial, but that seeing the positive may not be quite as helpful as persevering despite obstacles and results that may appear bleak. On the other hand, someone optimistic may excel in a setting like this by focusing on what they can do to inspire their workers and perhaps be better able to foster principled agents, workers who will go above and beyond, even when they could get away with not doing so (Padot pg. 33). Principled agents have been found to be a key to improved relations and support for foster care administration so this could be quite impactful as well (Padot pg. 156). Due to the significant potential benefits of each, I would not find it prudent to choose between an exceptionally gritty leader or an exceptionally optimistic one based on the type of enterprise.

Both grit and optimism can help make a great leader, and the two usually go hand in hand. Each trait is affiliated with resilience, the ability to bounce back after difficulty (Seligman lecture 43:00). You would be hard-pressed to find a gritty leader without optimism or an optimistic leader without grit. The two traits are so intertwined and connected with life satisfaction, which also promotes good leadership, that a study on contributors to teacher effectiveness was unable to isolate them from one another, which may have led to skewed results (Duckworth, Quinn, and Seligman pg. 7). Both are likely strong contributors to success, so in order to choose between a leader with relatively greater grit and relatively greater optimism, I would need to learn how they use these traits to motivate and inspire their workers and create a culture in which both workers and the organization prosper.