

Are leaders born or bred?

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For as long as leaders have led, we have wondered if their abilities are the result of mystical forces or if they represent a set of skills that can be learned. When we see a talented carpenter or engineer at work, we imagine that we can see what they do, so therefore what they do must be something that can be learned. Since we have to teach people technical skills, we often presume that it's learning those skills that makes someone an engineer. If you've ever met a really talented engineer, you'll know that they think in a fundamentally different way to someone who has only the technical knowledge required for the job.

For people such as leaders, artists or musicians, it's difficult to see what they do differently to anyone else. Therefore, we presume that they have some intangible quality that can't be categorised and so can't be learned. If this is the case, then where do the necessary skills come from? Leaders must just be born that way. Perhaps leadership is a genetic quality? Perhaps it's astrological? Perhaps it's a gift?

The first thing that we can say about leadership is that we all have a unique model of it in our heads. You know when you are inspired by a strong or charismatic leader. You also know when you are being managed by someone who should really be leading instead. You already know the difference, and the difference does not lie in those people, it is inside your head. Your existing model of leadership is certainly the best starting point for you to develop your leadership qualities.

The second thing we can say about leadership is that we all have the same physical equipment for detecting the presence of an outstanding leader – our eyes and ears. Therefore, the qualities of leadership must be something that we can see and hear and therefore reproduce ourselves.

We could spend time discussing what these behavioural qualities are, or what training courses you could go on to learn about them but the reality is that you already know what they are, for you. Leaders do not mould themselves on someone else's theoretical model, and my advice to you is to avoid academic leadership models. The first person you need to lead is yourself and I could even say that exceptionally strong leaders only lead themselves. Often, when they look behind them they are quite surprised to see how many followers they have.

A leader's attention does not rest on the people who follow. A leader's attention is only on the future, or at least their vision of the future which is so strong and compelling that other people find themselves drawn into it.

If we were to spend time looking at what exceptional leaders do that's different to what other people do, we would find that there are a handful of differences that anyone can adopt in order to develop their leadership potential.

Firstly, leaders believe that what they are doing is right. They tend not to ask for opinions or feedback, and they tend not to worry about things not turning out as they hope. You can appreciate that this isn't always a useful attitude but remember that a person or organisation that commits to a course of action is often more successful than the one that spends time trying to decide on a course of action.

Secondly, leaders are able to communicate their vision of the future in a way that inspires others to take action. They do not tell other people what to do. In a way, the leader recognises how everyone in the team contributes to the vision and then trusts them to do that. The leader is only interested in results, not process.

Thirdly, leaders do not dwell on the past. They look to the future and in doing so are able to make difficult decisions more easily than other people. In fact, the decisions are just as hard for them as for anyone else, they just get on with their lives once the decision is made rather than worrying about whether the decision was right or wrong. They recognise that being decisive is a more important quality than being right.

So, are leaders born or bred? Well, in a way, the answer is both. Natural leaders do not go on leadership development training courses. During their lives, they have learned important lessons that allow them to excel when placed in a leadership position. On the other hand, many people who find themselves placed in a leadership position are easily able to develop their natural skills with the right coaching. In practical terms, some leaders are born and some are bred and you wouldn't be able to tell the difference in their performance.

So, it's not important for anyone to worry if they will develop their leadership skills. Instead think about how you develop those skills. First, start with what you believe to be the model of excellence in leadership. Don't concern yourself with what the experts say – even this one! Instead, do what works for you.

This brings us to another important quality of leaders – they have a high degree of congruence. This means that they sound like they mean what they say and they do what they say they will do. This is not necessarily conscious on their part – it comes from their natural inclination to be honest with themselves and therefore with other people. I could help you to develop self belief or to acquire the communication skills but the truth is that you already have those skills. The easiest and most obvious way for you to demonstrate congruence and self belief is to do what you believe in, and say what you believe. For many people in organisations, this can lead to many questions about ethics and purpose. Leaders don't have this problem because they don't allow themselves to get into situations that they don't believe in and don't feel in control of.

So how can I sum this up into a simple piece of advice for you? Everything that I've mentioned as a quality of leadership and as a way for you to develop your leadership ability is already in your head as a memory of someone you know who inspires you and has encouraged you to take action in your career or life. So, there are many ways you can approach this and all of them are contained within my last suggestion for you:

As an exceptional leader, do only what you know is right.



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Peter's latest book "NLP in Business" is available at all good bookshops.

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