

Are leaders made or born: a critique of great man and trait theories assignment

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Leadership continues to be one of the most debated and studied topics in management and indeed society as a whole. This can be evidenced by the fact that if you search for leadership on Goggle 175, 000, 000 worldwide hits are recorded. Success in many arenas, whether it be business, the military, politics or the wider community is often primarily attributed to good leadership.

Equally, organisational failure or under-performance is just as readily attributed to poor leadership. Leadership has been the subject of intense interest and debate for over two and a half millennia, from Plato and Aristotle through to present leaders in the field. Despite such a prolonged period of study there however, remains no consensus on an accepted definition of what leadership is, little consensus on what makes for good leadership, as well as limited consensus to what extent leadership can be truly learned and if so how to best develop it.

As such it is easy to understand why it was Burns concluded that, “ Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on the earth. ” Among the many debates still raging after 2500 years is the question “ Are leaders born or made”; this assignment intends to further contribute to that debate through offering a critical analysis of “ Great Man” and Trait theories of leadership. The assignment will consider the strengths, weaknesses of the theories, as well as the potential dangers that may result for organisations that too readily accept “ Great Man” and Trait theories may result.

Finally the assignment will briefly consider the implications of the debate to leadership selection. Leaders are born a Critique The statements that “ he is a born leader” or “ she is a natural leader” are statements that many of us will hear over our lifetime of work. The statements from a theoretical perspective are closely associated with two schools of thought on Leadership i. e. the “ Classical Great Man” school and the trait school. For the majority of time that leadership has been studied these two schools have dominated thought on the subject.

The basis of the contentions of both schools of thought are that certain individuals have innate traits and characteristics that make them leaders and that these characteristics set them apart from other non leaders. Moreover historically many advocates of “ Great Man” and Trait theories have argued that you either have these characteristics or you do not and that largely the characteristics that determine if you are a leader can not be taught. More recent proponents however do accept that if you have the “ right Stuff” it can be built upon.

The theories have their philosophical roots with the likes of Plato, who in the Republic developed the concept of the “ Golds” who are destined to lead and the bronzes who by right of birth are to be led. Similar ideas were presented by Aristotle in Book 1 of his discourse on “ Politics” where he suggests that the rank of a person is through the superior power of implied virtue of knowledge, talent, ability, competence and belief. Such attributes and virtues he wrote, were by nature and circumstances of birth, and not accessible to the masses.

From birth he believed one is intended to rule or for subjection . Historically, “ Great Man” and trait theorists have pointed us to look at the likes of Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Lincoln, Ghandi and Churchill as individuals who history has demonstrated are “ clearly” superior and embody great leadership. Academically study has therefore looked to determine the specific traits and characteristics that such great men have, in order that we can better identify future great leaders .

The Trait theory of leadership has a number of appeals; intuitively it fits the notion that leaders are the individuals who are “ out front” and “ leading the way” guiding society or an organisation. Moreover it also helps meet the psychological need that organisations and society have to see its leaders as gifted people guiding organisations through the melee. A further strength of Trait theory is that it has a century of research to back it up.

The strength and longevity of the research therefore gives the theory a degree of credibility that more recent theories do not have. However, it is arguable that such credibility may not be deserved and indeed may be detrimental to organisational effectiveness. A further strength more specific to more modern variants of trait theory is that it sets out benchmarks for potential leaders measurement against, these benchmarks can be used to offer information to managers/leaders about their strengths and weaknesses and areas that may need more work on .

While superficially a simple and attractive approach to characterise leadership the “ Great Man” and Trait schools of thought were challenged from the mid twentieth century for perpetrating a myth that leadership was

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limited to a few special individuals imbued with specific traits. The two schools of thought have a number of weaknesses. Firstly they portray a very one dimensional view of leadership, often taken from a military/political context and generalise that successful traits exhibited in these situations will be equally applicable in a wider societal or business context.

Secondly, the schools fail to take account of differences in operational and strategic leadership and the differing requirements both have. Hence a highly effective, and motivational Tesco team leader is unlikely to have required skill set to lead the company in the board room, however such operational and frontline leadership is as much a prerequisite as effective board leadership if Tesco is to maintain its position as the UK's leading supermarket.

Thirdly the two schools of thought dismiss the leader follower relationship, portraying a very one way relationship where followers have little to no impact on leaders. While such a model may have some relevance in a highly centralised command and control organisation in the public and voluntary sector (The NHS in particular) as well as LEAN organisations such as Toyota the leader follower relationship is much more complicated. Most importantly, however "Great Man" and Trait theorists ignore the situation and context that the leader is operating in.

As Stoghill 1948 argues it is difficult to isolate a set of traits and characteristics of leaders without factoring in the situational effects.

Importantly too, much of the research on traits is not directed at understanding the impact leaders have on outcomes or on those they lead.

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Hence while the research looks at traits that may be important in leader emergence the research tends not to explore the relationship between leadership traits and employee productivity or employee satisfaction.

A significant criticism of the schools is that they romanticize the great leader presenting both a one sided portrayal of leadership as well as often conveniently glossing over their failings of individual leaders , . While this is particularly the case with political leaders (President Kennedy being the among the most notable to have his character “ made over”) similar trends are emerging for business, the likes of popular TV programmes such the “ Apprentice” present a very stereotypical and often unrepresentative portrayal of business leadership arguably whitewashing a culture of autocratic leadership and bullying.

The romanticization of great leaders portrays leaders as “ good” and affords them a moral authority, which in the cases of Ghandi, Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Mandela to greater or lesser extent may be deserved but is not representative of leaders in all fields. From a business context, Microsoft’s anti trust behaviour, the action of Enron executives and the actions of banks in precipitating the current credit crunch belie the myth that business leaders consistently act for the good. Indeed their relationship to shareholders would suggest that in many cases this is nlikely to be the case. The romanticization of great leaders also tends to give rise to the further fallacy that, the great leaders were always great leaders and remained great. History again shows this not to be the case, In the case of Napoleons he was very nearly killed in his action at the siege of Toulon prior to his rise

to power, his victory on that occasion owed much to luck rather than tactical skill. For Churchill his first foray into politics in 1899 ended in defeat and even after winning a seat a year later, he was deselected by his constituency soon afterwards.

Moreover despite his Wartime leadership he lost the 1945 general election with it being said “ that the nation did not see that the man who had led them in war was the right man to lead them in the peace”. In Alexander the Great's case while he extended his empire to India he did so at huge human cost to his army severely depleting it as a result of disease, ultimately to the detriment of the empire. It is also arguable that the romanticization of the great leader tends to lead to a glossing over of learning that such great leaders have had.

We know from history that the Pharaohs, Caesar, Maharajahs of India and kings of Europe were schooled for their leadership roles. Alexander the Great too was schooled for leadership being tutored for many years by Aristotle and generals in his father's army. Similarly, both Napoleon and Churchill both were schooled in leadership at respective Military academies. Trait and Great Man theories pay little attention to the impact that these events had in developing their capabilities. In contrast theorists such as McClelland argue it was exactly this learning and experience of leadership that helped develop these leaders.

From an academic perspective Stogdill's (1948) work on leadership theory severely challenged the Trait school of thought. His work synthesised more than 120 studies conducted between 1904 and 1947 concluding that despite

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so many studies been undertaken in the period no consistent set of traits had been established to differentiate leaders and non leaders in different situations. Moreover, more importantly Stoghill's findings indicated that individuals didn't become leaders solely because of the traits they possessed but that the traits that a leader possesses must be relevant to the situation in which a leader is operating.

The work of Stoghill's and others while highlighting weaknesses with Trait theory did not lead to its demise. Rather its proponents changed their emphasis of interest, moving it away from universal traits to traits relevant to particular situations. This while academically interesting may not be in the best interest of organisations in that the continued acceptance of the validity of Trait based leadership theories while not only arguably wrong promote dangerous myths that may adversely effect an organisations competitiveness in a number of ways.

Firstly, if organisations accept trait based definitions of leadership they are likely to look for leaders whom fit a particular profile and presume that those leaders will be equipped to deal with any situation. History has demonstrated that this is blatantly not been the case and this factor may in conjunction with a host of other economic and competitor related factors have contributed or indeed will contribute to organisational failure.

Furthermore, organisations that look to select leaders on a trait based model leave themselves open to falling victim of the HALO effect and basing their succession strategies on potentially groundless assumptions. Moreover, as David McCullough indicates given that " History shows us that the demands

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of leadership change from one era to another” selecting future leaders for a 21st century characterised by increased globalisation, the internet, a 24hr work culture and the rise of China as an economic superpower on the basis of the leaders who were successful in the 1980s and 1990s may not be the best model for organisations.

Secondly, as Tom Richman points out even if the skill sets and personality traits identified are appropriate research indicates that they are not the only or even the same qualities possessed by those with the potential to develop into senior leadership roles. Hence screening out those that do not meet a prescribed ultimate profile further reduces the talent pool and limits organisations in selecting those who may have the greatest potential to develop and benefit the organisation.

Thirdly, presenting leadership as the domain of a special few may discourage those with potential from pushing themselves into the fray as they perceive themselves as not having the complete package of skills to be a “ true leader” . This again may deny those organisations the benefits of fully utilising the potential talent available to them. Moreover it may actually lead to the deskilling of followers who idealise the leader and the reduction of their effective input to delivery of organisational outcomes, as well as make internal succession planning more difficult.

Arguably this is the situation that Apple finds itself in as a result of the reliance of the organisation on Steve Jobs and the cult of personality that has built up around him. Fourthly, the conceptualisation of leadership as being the domain of the few has undoubtedly played (and in all probability

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continues to play) a significant role in glass ceiling faced by women, as until extremely recently only men were seen to possess the necessary traits for leadership.

This hugely reduced the talent pool that organisations were actively looking at. It has and continues to risk the likelihood of pushing female leaders adopting behaviours alien to their style potentially limiting their effectiveness. This may be particularly relevant if work on the effectiveness of women in leadership roles is accurate, and that their ability to bring to bear “ softer skills and more inclusive styles of leadership does offer benefits to organisations.

Fifthly, the conceptualisation of leadership as being the domain of a few (whether born or made) tends to promote the myth of that in today’s complex world it is possible for a leader to be on top of everything . Furthermore it also tends to perpetuate the continuance of stratified command and control type structures within organisations. While not necessarily disastrous such structures are increasingly being seen as less responsive and fit for purpose in an age that often requires an immediate response.

Hence the conceptualisation of leadership in this way may damage an organisations ability to effectively compete. It is also arguable that stratified command and control modelled organisations tend to be less geared to developing cultures of creativity, again with potential negative impacts on organisations competitive ability. Despite the considerable difficulties with trait theory, the 60 years of study since Stoghill’s work have done little to

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make the position clearer as to why do leaders emerge and what make them affective.

The likes of Fielder and Vroom have added to the debate with the development of 'situational' and 'contingency' theories of leadership (Fiedler 1967; House 1971; Vroom and Yetton 1974) which have shifted the emphasis of thought away from Traits and style as the determinants of leadership to context-sensitive leadership, where leadership effectiveness is dependent on the leader's diagnosis and understanding of situational factors, followed by the adoption of the appropriate style to deal with each circumstance. The works of Adair too offer a further important contribution with his action centred model (below).

For Adair effective leadership is seen to result from the balancing of task, team and individual needs within the context of the total leadership situation. With the circumstances of each situation determining the priority given to each area. Adair is also clear that improvement in leadership ability is possible through adoption of the principles of the model, the proof to this assertion would appear to be evidenced by the fact that the model forms a central element to the leadership development of 100s of Young Military Officers each year at Sandhurst, Dartmouth and Lympstone.

Adairs model and contingency theories are particularly important in that they conceptualise leadership as being outcome orientated. Importantly too Action Centred Leadership and Contingency theories recognise the intrinsic relationship between the leader and follower and in Adairs case, the need for the leader to nurture this relationship. This concept that leadership is a

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process that occurs between leaders and followers, where the needs of others are central to the role of the leader s also central to newer theories of leadership such as Charismatic and Transformational leadership theory. This development arguably also broadens our conceptions of leadership in that it goes beyond simply the exchange of rewards but deals with the higher needs and growth needs of followers. In the NHS the recognition of staffs higher needs is a central role for leaders as the motivations of many joining the NHS relate to the realisation of higher needs rather than financial reward.

Some role for Traits and innate ability? The development of Charismatic and Transformational leadership theory also offers an interesting paradox for thinking on leadership. Research into it shows Transformational Leadership to be an effective form of leadership but it is essentially a trait based model of leadership, emphasising the importance of the leader in establishing a common meaning and vision for organisations to unite behind and move towards.

The perceived effectiveness of transformational leaders in comparison to transactional leaders may as Northouse argues be as a result of our psychological need to elevate leaders to a special position but may equally be due to the fact that leaders are different to their followers and that they possess different skill sets and have different (not superior) physiological, personality and intellectual capabilities. Evidence from genetics is beginning to emerge to support the premise that genetically influenced aspects of our being may play a role in our capacity to lead.

Okuyama (2000) highlights that elements of our DNA make up influence our risk taking behaviours, a trait that some theorists relate to leadership. Genetics is also increasingly being recognised as playing a crucial role in Intelligence, a trait that many studies and theorists relate closely to leadership ability (inc Judge, Colbert and Ilies 2004) and the same is true too in relation to the big 5 personality traits, which studies such as Salgado (1997) and Judge et al (2002) have identified as having significant influence on perceived leadership performance.

Implications for Leadership Selection The importance of Traits and the “ Born or Made” dilemma offers a considerable conundrum to organisations for leadership selection and development. If organisations accept Traits as the primary determinant they risk falling foul of some of the perils highlighted above, however they do need a system identify those with the potential to develop into future leaders. For more senior executives and leaders, it is self evident that selection on the basis of personality or traits alone is unlikely to be successful and indeed may be unadvisable.

A track record and history of delivery in challenging roles, as well as a portfolio of experiences complimentary to the planned future roles are likely to be far stronger determinants of future leadership success than personality traits. Selection for roles at this level however must also take account the context the organisation is in and the needs the leader is to fulfil as well as organisational culture and how potential future leaders will fit in with that culture.

For potential young leaders traits based analysis as well as academic achievement are often used by large organisations in their graduate selection protocols (inc the NHS, Shell, Armed Forces, Virgin). To a large extent with new entrants to the workforce organisations have little option but to utilise such methods but even for this group of potential future leaders increasingly evidence of applied leadership experience is being required, and indeed in the armed forces selection involves demonstration of potential in specific leadership tasks.

For this group of potential leaders; with little or no leadership experience, organisations have to be aware of the likelihood of a high attrition rate and the need to provide these potential leaders with appropriate opportunities to challenge and develop them. Moreover they also need to provide appropriate support / mentoring / coaching to ensure that they develop as fully as possible as even the most self aware and talented individuals need moulding. Equally these young leaders must be self aware of their development needs and proactively seek opportunities to get the experience and skills that will allow them shine as leaders. Conclusion In conclusion, while “ Great Man” and Trait theories offered a psychologically comforting view of leadership, more recent study has highlighted weaknesses with this perception of leadership.

Difficulties with the theories include that they provide a very limited and one dimensional view of leadership which does nothing to understand the relations leaders have with their followers or understand the impact that the context of a situation has on the leaders response to it. Similarly they also

promote a highly elitist view to leadership which if adopted by organisations risks them severely under utilising the talent they have as well as leaving many employees with unmet higher needs.

While some trait theorists would see this as an inevitable consequence of the unequal distribution of leadership characteristics between leaders and followers other theorists such as Adair have provided a strongly evidenced case that with appropriate behaviours and consideration of task, team and individual effective leadership can be delivered by a much wider and diverse set of individuals. Despite the work of Adair and more egalitarian leadership theorists dismissing the impacts of traits on leadership may be unwise.

Genetically all men (women) are not created equally, they have different strengths and weaknesses and different personalities. These it is increasingly being recognised may play a role in our capability to be a leader. While it is tempting to look at the genetically based traits as the most important determinants of capability, we must be careful not too, for as Greenfield (2003) argues genes may “ make things happen” but alone they are not sufficient to turn those with the genetic make up offering leadership potential into fully fledged leaders.

For this they need experience , nurturing and development. Ultimately, it is the contention of this assignment that it is the interplay of genetics, personality, experiences and behaviours that determine the development of potential leaders into true leaders, hence I would agree with Bruce Avolio that leaders are both born and made .

Moreover, fundamentally it does not matter whether it is nature or nurture that is predominant in determining an individual's leadership potential, as potential leaders if they want to excel as leaders need to be self-aware of their capabilities (both strengths and weaknesses) and work actively to continually refine and enhance their capabilities and mitigate their weaknesses. Bibliography Books J. Adair, (1990) *Not Bosses But Leaders* 2nd ed. Guildford, Kogan Page J Antonakis et al (2004) *The Nature of Leadership*, Thousand Oaks California, SAGE G.

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