

Is leadership a skill
that can be taught
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Is leadership a skill that can be taught or is it an innate ability that only a few can possess?

The question that leaders are born or made has long been debated in the academia (Avolio, 2005). Like the debate on chicken and egg this debate has become timeless. Researchers have taken sides proving one point over another for many decades. Before venturing into answering this question a discussion as to what leadership is according to the major theories of leadership will be undertaken.

What is Leadership According to Major Theories?

The question “ What exactly is Leadership” was asked when leadership started gaining acceptance as a subject in the early 19th century (Stogdill, 1974). The subject of leadership needed content and definitions, and this led to the emergence of early theories of leadership known as The Trait Theories. In the absence of a well-documented research on the subject the researchers looked at live subjects (leaders) around the world and came up with most common traits among them (Costa and McCrae, 1998). Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) concluded that the great leaders may have many different traits but common traits among them make them great leaders. Some of these traits were recognised as honesty, confidence, job related knowledge, and ambition. The trait theories simply perceived the appearance of leadership. They helped to make leadership an academic subject and laid the foundation for further research. The theory looked at the aspects which distinguished the leaders from their followers and came up with certain traits. The theory’s basic assumption was that since traits are acquired by nature, leaders are born. Anyone who possess specific traits can become a

great leader (Northouse, 2012) . However the theory came under criticism in the 1940's when researchers started proving that not everyone with these traits can go on to become a leader let alone a great leader. The specific criticism of the theory was that if traits are the only facet predicting the leadership then organisations just need to hire the people with the right traits and achieve great results with exceptional leadership, however in reality this was not the case (Hogan et al., 1977).

Yukl and Van Fleet (1992) noted that the criticism on trait theories led to the emergence of another school of thought known as behavioural theories. As the name states the behavioural theories focus on specific behaviours rather than traits. It looked at what leaders do rather than what qualities they possess. Where on one hand the traits are believed to be inborn, and on the other the behaviours are believed to be learned over a period of time. The earliest theory in the behaviour school of thought is Kurt Lewin's (1944) theory of Autocratic, Democratic and Laissez-faire styles of leadership. In this theory Lewin identified that leaders have specific leadership styles which have been learned over a period of time. One of them was the Autocratic leadership style which believed on giving orders and expecting the orders to be obeyed. No questions are likely to be asked and followers only do what they are told. The specific style can be seen in armed forces around the world where soldiers only obey the orders without asking questions. The other style he suggested is known a Democratic style, which is currently followed around the world in democracies. Democratic leaders take into consideration the opinions of stakeholders or the representatives of stakeholders and take decisions accordingly (Lewin, 1944). Conger and

Kanungo (1987) noted that the basic assumption of behaviour theory was very different from the trait theories. Behaviour Theories basically assumed that leadership is not about the traits but it is about the behaviours which means leaders are not born, rather they can be trained to become good leaders. Lewin's theory was followed by Black and Mount's Managerial Grid Theory, University of Michigan Theory, and Ohio State University Theory, all focusing on certain behaviour of leaders, majorly known as production and people oriented styles of leadership (Davis and Luthans, 1980).

The behavioural theories were replaced by contingency theories in the 70's. Although the behaviour theories presented a logical answer to what is leadership it came under heavy criticism when researchers proved that one style of leadership will not work in all situations. An example was famous corporate leader Al Dunlap, Dunlap famous of his tough and autocratic approach was often hired by companies who were looking to revive, downsize and get back on track after heavy losses. Dunlap always helped the companies with ruthless axing of employees, freezing salaries and cutting back costs. He helped several companies till he ended up in a company which was doing just fine in the market. However due to his autocratic style he soon became unpopular and loyal employees started leaving the company due to his attitude. This led to the eventual firing of Dunlap from the company. This real life example is one of many where a certain behaviour did not work due to a different situation (Robbins and Judge, 2012). Yukl (2002) commented that contingency theories basic assumption was that leaders have to adopt certain styles of leadership according to the situation. The most famous theory of it is Fiedler's model which suggested

that a leader's style is fixed, which is either production oriented or employees' oriented, but the situation can change. The situation was defined by leader member relationship, task structure, and position power. The theory, supported by research, suggested that every situation requires a different kind of leader's style. It was proven by research that a situation in which leader member relationship is good, position power is strong, and task structure is high, a leader with production oriented approach will perform best (Fiedler, 1967). Another famous contingency theory was situational leadership theory which suggested that the leader has to change its style according to followers' readiness. Followers readiness was defined as the extent to which followers are able and willing to do something for the leader (Graeff, 1983).

These famous theories define leadership in different ways. It is hard to find an agreement on one common definition of leadership in the literature. However when we differentiate between a leader and a manager we find agreements that a leader has followers not subordinates and a leader inspires and does not authorise, lastly a leader gives vision towards achievement of a common goal.

Leadership can be taught or it's an inborn ability:

After concluding what is leadership the next question that needs answering is are leaders' born or made?

The " Made" school of thought over a period of time has gained popularity. One survey among the top executives of government and private sector organisations in the USA suggested that 54% believed leaders can be made

while 19% felt they were born and 28% thought they are both born and made (Stringer, 2004). Ruvolo et al. (2004) claimed that since the early theories looked at the appearance of leadership they believed that leaders were born. The examples were taken from great leaders of that time including Martin Luther King and George Washington. The researchers who believed that leaders are born strongly believe that nature plays a much higher role in personality development as compared to environment, education and training. One very famous example quoted by these researchers is the study of twins separated at birth. This study took 100 sets of twins who were separated at birth due to different reasons. The separation meant that these twins were brought up by different people, they had different education and environments at home. Logically the choices that these people made in life later should have been influenced by the way they were brought up, but the study proved otherwise. With several examples from the 100 sets it was seen that the twins, although separated at birth, had striking resemblances in the choices they made in life. One set of twins (men), 30 years later, had the same model of car with the same colour, they both owned a dog with the same name, and they both had similar choices in holidays (Newman et al., 1937). Another famous study in this regard was done on young children. These children, all under 5, were judged for the traits they possessed. The study revealed that their dominating traits such as shyness, confidence, and arrogance was adopted from their genes, which meant someone in the family from maternal or parental side had these traits (McCrae et al., 2000). These two studies have presented evidence which suggests that leadership is a born trait and only a few may possess it. Over the years other studies have taken place which have focused on proving the

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same. De Neve et al. (2013) described a study conducted at UCL which suggested that the people who had supervisory positions in companies had a Gene called RS4950 in them. The critics of such research claim that these studies are flawed and they only consider a certain number of variables while ignoring the others that may play a considerable role in leadership positions. For instance there is a possibility that many people with Gene RS4950 have no supervisory or leadership positions and they may be living their normal lives. However since the research did not consider including such people in their sample the research is flawed (Parkay and Hall, 1992).

The other school of thought which believes that leaders are made have their own arguments for it. This school of thought simply argues that if nature plays its role in creating great leaders, for example, why a certain region or country has more leaders as compared to others. For instance current fast developing countries such as China, Malaysia and Turkey are producing effective leaders which are helping these countries progress. On the other hand most of the countries in Africa and some in Asia (such as India and Pakistan) lack supply of effective leaders right now (Ridley, 2003). Gregersen et al. (1998) similarly suggested that majority of Fortune 500 companies belong to America, for which the credit is given to the exceptional corporate leadership. This shows that the culture, education, and training plays more of a role as compared to genes of a leader. Day (2001) emphasized that this school of thought feels that culture and education help people gain certain skills. One of these skills is leadership which is seen more in some countries as compared to others. A study in different universities in America revealed that Stanford University produces the highest number of entrepreneurs in

the country. This study shows that education and skills developed at Stanford are different as compared to other universities in America and that's why they have the highest number of entrepreneurs (Eesley and Miller, 2012). Again, this strengthens the belief that the nurturing of an individual will play a vital role in taking and acquiring the leadership skill as compared to nature. Another study by Goldsmith and Morgan (2004) researched 88,000 managers who participated in leadership development programs. These programs were focused on teaching managers how to be effective leaders. Interestingly many of these managers came back from training and applied the knowledge learned in their professional lives. On the other hand the managers who did not go through the program showed no improvement (Goldsmith and Morgan, 2004). However the critics of this school of thought ask the question if the leaders can be made why does everyone not go on to become a leader? The question seems logical considering that even the best universities will produce 15-20% exceptional corporate leaders who will become the pride of the University, but what about rest of the 80% people, why do they not assume leadership roles (Goleman, 2003). Nuture et al. (2004) answered the question by claiming that leadership in a group of people is like a bell curve, in which the bottom 15% will not have the potential and ability to acquire this skill. The top 15-20% are the exceptional talent who do not need leadership development. However it is about the vast majority that lies between top and bottom 15%, who if trained well, can acquire the skill of leadership.

Conclusion:

It is hard to conclude a debate which has such strong arguments and research to support both sides. There is no denying the fact that nature plays a vital role in leadership. Many traits are seen commonly in great leaders. These traits have helped us identify what leadership is. These traits have also helped organisations recruit the right people. However nature may not be the only answer to effective leadership. Looking around and going back in history it can be seen that leaders come from different places, different background and a leader's children will not always turn out to be leaders. On the other hand it is noted that certain cultures instil confidence in children at a very early age, they develop opinion and often go on to make better choices as compared to children who come from a culture where choices are imposed and respect is so embedded that it stops them from asking questions and they end up making poor and limited choices in life. There is no denying that some people are born leaders, but there are no universally accepted traits which define the born leadership. On the other hand training and development focus on producing leaders without the assumption of born traits and produce better results. So it can be concluded that nature and nurture both play a role in leadership, however nurture has a more important role as compared to nature.

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