

Leaders are Born, not Made

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Name:

Institution:

Date:

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1.0 Introduction

Leadership is the process of influencing the behaviour of others to work willingly and enthusiastically towards achieving some set goals and objectives. It indicates the ability of an individual to maintain good relations with followers and offer motivation to others for achieving organisational objectives (Olson 2009). In my opinion, a leader is a person who guides others by showing them the way and acting as a role model. Being a leader comes in different forms, and there are certain criteria that one has to meet to become one. For example, in real life, it is not easy to take a group of people and get them to work together towards a common goal. This can only be done by people who have unique principles and values. A leader's most important principle is integrity as the followers will need to trust the leader completely before they decide to follow him or her. A great leader also needs to show great commitment to the course and always have a positive approach. In addition, a leader should ensure that his followers are honoured, recognised, and well taken care of. Lastly and most important of all, a good leader needs to lead from the front so as to set a good example to the followers (Olson 2009).

Throughout history, great leaders have always emerged and impacted human lives greatly. The most notable ones include Winston Churchill who promoted democracy, Martin Luther King, who led the struggle for racial equality that forever changed the USA, and Nelson Mandela who led the fight for freedom in South Africa. The new crop of world leaders includes the likes of Richard Branson and Bill Gates, who have become very successful entrepreneurs. The debate about whether great leaders are born or made has been an ongoing topic of discussion for decades. Everyone has something to say about leadership, thus sometimes we are tempted to accept what we hear as the truth. This essay aims critically analyses the evidence from both sides of the argument and comes up with a conclusion based on the findings.

1.1 Empirical Evidence Supporting that Leaders Are Born

In the early 1900's researchers focused mainly on the traits that leaders possessed. This is because of the belief that some people were born with unique traits that made them leaders. For example, a recent study by a leading American Military scholar suggests that great leaders like Churchill and Thatcher are born and not made. John Adair, the World's first professor of leadership studies at the University of Surrey and the proponent of action-centred leadership model claims that these leaders have more grey matter in their brains than other ordinary people. This grey matter is the component responsible for decision making and memory (Adair 2010).

According to Swaroop and Prasad (2013), leadership can either be a talent or skill. This creates two dimensions leading to the argument on whether leadership is inborn or acquired. If leadership is viewed as a talent, then leadership is inborn. However, where leadership is viewed as a skill, this means that it can be acquired. The argument that leaders are born is mainly supported by various leadership theories. These include the Trait theory that proposes that leaders possess special characteristics and personalities. The theory assumes that the traits give rise to certain behaviours that are consistent in different situations. According to the theory, leaders are born with certain traits that develop with time (CIMA, 2007; Colbert, Judge, Choi, & Wang, 2012).

Trait theory emphasises various key attributes including influence, motivation, self-confidence, cognitive ability, integrity and honesty, and interpersonal skills (Oliver, Robins, & Pervin 2008). Groves and La Rocca (2011) associated transformational leadership with behaviours such as intellectual stimulation, charisma, individualised consideration, and inspirational motivation. The belief that leadership is associated with certain traits has led to the development of the Big Five

leadership traits that include intelligence, self-confidence, perseverance, sociability, and integrity (Bligh 2009). According to Dr. Rob Yeung, an executive coach at leadership consulting firm Talentspace, personality and traits such as extroversion and emotional stability are inherited. Some people are naturally better in leadership than others as seen in extroverts who socially interact more than their peers. Those people with emotional stability are better performers in times of crisis compared to their nervous teammates, and this is a strong indication of their leadership capabilities (Accountancy Live 2015).

Another theory that supports the argument that leaders are born is the Great Man theory. The theory was founded on the central premise that certain individuals are destined to become leaders. The theory further hypothesises that great men are naturally skilled and that leadership capacity is inborn. The Trait theory and the Great Man theory present an indication of what makes leaders and enable organisations to establish leadership potential among employees. Organisations are, therefore, able to identify individuals who may possess leadership skills. This is achieved by identifying the characteristics that make the individuals suitable for leadership positions (Bligh 2009).

Various studies have been conducted to determine whether leaders are born or made. According to Oliver et al. (2008), a psychologist by the name of Galton conducted a study to establish the specific traits that leaders possess and create a set of characteristics that can be understood by others. Another study titled “Nature vs. nurture: Are leaders born or made” supports the idea that leaders are born and not made. The study focused on twins and compared their leadership skills and leadership traits such as judgment, sociability, and aggression. The study established systematic differences between leaders and non-leaders (NetworkHR 2015). In their study,

Swaroop and Prasad (2013) established that leadership is a skill rather than talent, thereby, disqualifying the argument that leaders are born.

The argument that leadership is based on certain traits is critiqued due since it lacks explanatory power. Critics argue that the approach cannot be consistently used to determine leaders from non-leaders. This is because some individuals who possess the traits that are associated with leadership are not leaders. Additionally, some individuals who have been leaders and have widely influenced the human race did not possess the traits (Bligh 2009).

1.2 Empirical Evidence Supporting the Leaders are Made

Many people disagree with the argument that leaders are born. This has led to the proposition that leaders are made. For example, Mary Chapman, Director –General of the Institute of Management, doesn't believe that leaders are born but rather people develop leadership skills as they grow up. Even though she acknowledges that some skills are innate, she states that other traits are necessary to make one a good leader. She believes that leadership starts at a very young age when children are given responsibility and also taking the opportunity to manage in different of contexts. She adds that being coached with someone who encourages you to be interactive with other people plays a big role in shaping you as a leader.

Garic (2006) also believes that leaders are made and not born. In his article "Are Leaders Born or Made", he argues that the leaders that we hold in high regard have a common feature in that they all have the desire to lead and to be influential people in the society. This is not because of their natural ability but their desire to lead combined with sets of skills they have acquired to use as leaders. According to the researcher, the only difference between these leaders and their followers is the desire they had when they began to lead. Everything else was learnt. Therefore,

for one to be a good leader, one does not have to possess the leadership gene as most of the leadership skills are developed through the real life experiences that we encounter.

According to Allio (2005), leadership is not a craft that schools can teach but it can surely be learned. Leadership programmes can be used to improve leadership skills among individuals and also teach them to demonstrate acts of leadership. The author believes that the role of a good leader includes establishing values, developing visions and the necessary strategies, and initiating changes that are necessary to bring growth to the organisation. In addition, the researcher stresses the importance of effective leadership behaviours among leaders.

It is clear knowledge that you cannot force someone to become a leader by any means as some people don't have any desire to lead or are incompetent leaders no matter how highly you may regard their skills. However, leadership can be instilled into someone by giving them support, providing them with management education and opportunities to improve their leadership skills (Allio 2005). This is why public and private organisations invest a lot of money and resources in leadership training programmes. They normally send individuals with high potential to such programmes in the hope that they will improve their leadership skills. These programmes challenge the participants to improve their self-esteem, give them a cognitive experience, as well, as polishing their communication skills. These leadership programmes, however, do have failures. This is why any plans to develop leaders must include processes for identifying candidates with the required skills and motivation to assume leadership roles (Allio 2005). When selecting the candidates, one should look for four key traits: morality, potential for growth, positive attitude, and strong motivation. Potential leaders must show strong desire to achieve results, have positive values and motives, and most of all should demonstrate the capacity to

grow in the leadership position (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, n.d.). This demonstrates that leadership behaviours are modelled over time.

In his article, “How Leaders are Made”, Michael R. Notaro states that the most pressing issues in the current world requires the new crop of leaders who think outside the box to engage, empower, and inspire the world. The author also says that great leaders are hard to find mainly because only a few people develop their leadership abilities. Leadership is cultivated, and the process of leadership development is not easy and every aspiring leader needs a support mechanism to grow and flourish. Notaro (2013) elaborates four phases one needs to undergo to become a good leader: self-awareness, self-discovery, self-confidence, and self-mastery. The researcher claims that leadership requires connecting with people at a deeper level so as to expand their appeal and depth of influence (Notaro, 2013).

Researchers maintain the environment has an influence on the leadership capabilities of individuals. The environment nurtures leaders by providing opportunities and experiences that shape their leadership capabilities. According to Allo (2005), leadership capabilities are acquired through experiences that challenge individuals to be innovative, adaptive, and inspiring. The researcher emphasises that great leaders are evaluated on the basis of what they achieve rather than their qualities and leadership styles. Dongen (2014) supports the argument that leaders are made and encourages organisations to invest sufficient resources into leader development programmes.

1.3 Conclusion

The essay has presented arguments on whether leaders are born or made. In my opinion, leaders are made and not born. Though trait theories indicate that leadership is innate, it is evident that

some leaders lack the characteristics that are associated with leadership. Moreover, it is evident that leadership can be an acquired skill and that people can learn to become good leaders by improving their leadership skills. In this regard, it is advisable for parents to start nurturing their children into leadership roles at a young age as this will enable them to perfect their leadership skills as they grow up. This is because the to meet the requirements of a good leader requires a lot of hard work, determination and courage, Though, it is not possible to conclusively discount that some leadership skills are God-given, with additional knowledge, positive attitude, and experience, individuals can improve their natural talents and become successful leaders.

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