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# INFORMED VIEWPOINT ARTICLE

## Leadership development: teaching versus learning

Leadership  
development

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is to elucidate the limitations of contemporary approaches to developing leaders and to present alternative approaches.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper offers a review and critique of the assumptions on which current leadership programs are based.

**Findings** – Most leadership training initiatives fail to produce leaders. Typical programs teach leadership theory, concepts, and principles; they promote leadership literacy but not leadership competence. Paradoxically, however, while leadership cannot be taught, leadership can be learned. Men and women become leaders by practice, by performing deliberate acts of leadership. The primary role of a good leader (one who is competent and ethical) is to establish and reinforce values and purpose, develop vision and strategy, build community, and initiate appropriate organizational change. This behavior requires character, creativity, and compassion, core traits that cannot be acquired cognitively.

**Practical implications** – For those charged with the responsibility of developing leaders, the three necessary steps are to select the right candidates, create learning challenges, and provide mentoring. Those who seek to develop effective leadership training programs must first establish a metric for assessing leadership effectiveness. They must then design experiments that can establish a causal or statistically significant relationship between training initiatives and leadership competency. Evidence suggests that the most effective leadership programs will focus on building self-knowledge and skills in rhetoric and critical thinking.

**Originality/value** – This paper challenges the utility of most leadership training. Leadership cannot be taught, although potential leaders can be educated.

**Keywords** Leadership, Training management, Leadership development

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Public and private organizations continue to embrace the myth that they can develop effective leaders by investing millions of dollars and many hours in leadership training programs. But the current approaches to leadership development offer no more potential return than many of the other historic panaceas for reversing organizational torpor and decline, such as total quality management and reengineering.

There is little evidence that any course or program produces better leaders, despite their many advocates. Nevertheless, organizations continue to send their staff to programs that purport to teach men and women to become leaders – in a day, a week, or a year. The architects and purveyors of these programs include the business schools and their executive-education divisions, highly-regarded institutions like the American Management Association and the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), and a host of



experientially-oriented organizations like Outward Bound and the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). These organizations are part of an enormous industry; a Google search currently shows over seven million matches for “leadership programs”.

The dubious proposition of all these enterprises is that an intensive educational program can raise consciousness, change behavior, and transform managers into leaders. As a result, they prey on the common aspirations of those who seek to rise to leadership positions. After all, almost everyone wants to be a leader, for leaders have more power and prestige than followers, and they typically earn more money.

Organizations that send high-potential individuals to leadership programs are optimistic that they will become better leaders. In a contemporary analogue to the Hawthorne effect, performance may improve when the organization pays more attention to the lucky candidates, who view their selection as tacit endorsement and reward for past behavior. Of course, those who graduate from leadership programs do acquire a vocabulary that implies leadership literacy. This allows them to act with greater authority, regardless of the merit of their decisions, and their followers may be more inclined to support new leadership initiatives.

But what do these programs actually accomplish? They teach participants about leadership, presenting historical perspectives on leadership theory, new paradigms, and lists of leadership virtues. They give the aspiring leaders a cognitive experience. But do they teach them how to lead? That seems doubtful, for learning to lead entails learning to behave differently. No one can learn to ride a bicycle, shave with a straight razor, or execute a graceful golf stroke by reading a manual or listening to a lecture. Mastery of these activities entails experimentation and learning, followed by repeated and dedicated practice. Taking a course on wise men may help you learn about them, but it seems unlikely to make you wiser! Leadership is no different.

Formal leadership programs may challenge us or reinforce our self-esteem, but they do not reliably produce long-term change in our psyches or our conduct. They may heighten our awareness of the behavioral patterns of others, but they cannot replicate the environment in which leaders must practice their craft nor provide the time required to reshape behavior. As a result, fundamental behavioral change is rare, and graduates usually regress to old patterns within weeks.

Participants in leadership programs often do polish certain skills, particularly in communications, and they may develop greater awareness of how they present themselves to others. But true leadership is much more than sleek packaging. Leadership is a potentiality, inchoate and unrealized until it is developed.

In Aristotle’s model of virtue, men become just by performing just acts[1]. They become brave by performing acts of bravery. Similarly, men become leaders by performing deliberate acts of leadership. Leadership is simply not a craft that schools can teach; men and women become leaders only after tempering in the harsh crucible of organizational experience. So paradoxically, while leadership cannot be taught, it can be learned.

### **What is the role of leaders?**

The failures of leadership programs stem in part from confusion about what leaders do. Leaders (like doctors or lawyers) fill a set of roles, each of which has a particular purpose[2]. Thus, the roles of a good organizational leader (one who is both competent and ethical) include the following:

- establish and reinforce values and purpose;
- develop vision and the strategies necessary to achieve the vision;
- build the community necessary to implement the strategies; and
- initiate and manage the changes necessary to assure growth and survival.

Good leaders behave in ways that enable them to succeed in these roles. Compiling lists of the prerequisite traits is a compulsory exercise for leadership theorists (for an exhaustive review of trait theory, see Stogdill, 1948). Recent nominations for such traits include humility (Collins, 2001), credibility (Kouzes and Posner, 2002), and modesty (Badarocco, 2002) (all reflecting the current reaction against the cult of charisma!)

I propose that effective leadership behavior requires character, creativity, and compassion, core qualities or traits that cannot be acquired cognitively.

Character is the foundation for ethical leadership behavior. It includes dimensions of integrity, courage, honesty, and the will to do good. Most developmental psychologists assert that character forms as a result of early training and exposure to appropriate role models. Moral training later in life (during leadership programs) has limited impact on innate moral bias. Sermons on morality may remind the congregation not to sin, but they typically have little impact on venality, greed, and corruption.

Creativity is the primary source of the leader's ability to envision inspiring futures, to adapt to change, and to devise new paradigms to replace outdated old models. Leaders think laterally, express passion, initiate change, and encourage diversity. Managers think linearly; they favor reason, stability, and consensus. Managers are needed to oversee repetitive tasks, activities that can be catalogued in policy manuals and organized in guides to procedures. But when new challenges arise, we need individuals who can invent new approaches to resolving these challenges. We need men and women who can see patterns and create a context that leads to foresight. Such inventors for the most part are not the honor-roll graduates of business schools or leadership training programs: they are iconoclasts, innovators, and creative dynamos.

Compassion is the quality that leaders need in order to empathize with followers and ultimately to build a benevolent community in which men and women align themselves with the purpose of the enterprise. After all, it is the allegiance of followers that gives a leader the power to carry out his or her agenda. Can compassion be taught in a leadership program? Awareness may be raised, but no leadership program even attempts to engender compassion on the part of its students, to infuse them with "emotional intelligence," a concept that has been actively promoted in recent leadership initiatives (Goleman *et al.*, 2002).

### **What is the path to leadership?**

If leadership programs do not help much, what then is the path to leadership? The CCL advocates the development of self-management competence, social capabilities, and work facilitation capabilities (McCauley and Van Velsor, 2004).

For those charged with the responsibility for developing leaders, I believe that there are three necessary steps:

- (1) *Select the right candidates.* Preparing men and women for leadership roles is an obligation of incumbent leaders that dates back to the fifth century BC, when Plato advocated the training of men who would eventually lead the state as

philosopher-kings[3]. According to Plato, potential rulers in a just society needed to first serve an apprenticeship in which they acquired the necessary skills, including a mastery of philosophy. He asserted that “Unless philosophers become kings in our cities, or unless those who are kings and rulers become philosophers, I believe there can be no end of troubles in our cities.” Today’s leaders must be equally thoughtful as they exercise authority.

Selecting the right candidates (identifying potential philosopher-kings) is not easy. There are four tell-tale traits to look for:

- *Strong motivation.* Potential leaders must exhibit a strong need to achieve (and a history of taking initiative) as well as a drive for power. Such men and women often have a “redemptive urge”. Those who lack this fervor and the willingness to make an extended commitment to the leadership path are not likely to succeed.
  - *Positive attitude.* The inspirational force of leaders can be sustained only if they evince optimism in the face of adversity. Resilience and adaptability are key virtues for apprentice leaders.
  - *Morality.* Potential leaders must have positive values and benevolent motives, for they must take on the responsibility of helping their community release its potential and fulfill its manifest destiny. A moral backbone is critical for a leader who aspires to virtuous goals. Devils and crooks lead us astray rather than down the path of long-term success, often with devastating results[4].
  - *Potential for growth.* Great leaders demonstrate the capacity to develop in office as they practice leading; they are eager to learn and refine their craft.
- (2) *Create learning challenges.* On-the-job training is the sine qua non of the leadership development process. Leadership is dormant until possible leaders have the opportunity to display their mettle in specific situations. Leadership competence develops when an individual is forced to address the challenge of innovating, inspiring, and adapting. Trial and error is a key element in the education of leaders; many executives report that their greatest learning occurred as the result of a failure rather than a success. Bennis and Thomas (2002) suggest that all potential leaders must pass through a crucible that provides a transforming experience.

A good model for leadership training comes from the field of medicine. Surgical training, for example, is based on a classical sequence for procedures: see one, do one, teach one. In top surgical departments, leaders start with interns who have a good foundation in anatomy and other relevant disciplines but no experience in surgery, spend years training them, and then recruit faculty from the same ranks. As in the case of many professions, top performers in medicine distance themselves from average performers by practicing assiduously. The moral for leaders who wish to develop a legacy is this: once apprentices have mastered the theory, give them as much practice as possible, thereby learning from the very process of teaching.

Ultimately, the leader in training will develop a portfolio of behaviors to draw upon to respond to specific challenges. The trial-and-error source of learning can be augmented by observation and the study of role models. Case histories

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that document the rise and fall of leaders can be helpful: consider the examples of Napoleon, Churchill, and Clinton.

- (3) *Provide mentoring.* Teaching leadership is like teaching enlightenment – it is not possible by the direct conveyance of the Ten Commandments or the Eightfold Way, the Buddhist prescription for attaining Nirvana. However, just as great spiritual leaders communicate the path to enlightenment, leaders in organizations can point the way for their learners. This is the task of a coach or guide, a person who motivates, educates, and leads by example. Tichy (2002), for instance, endorses the importance of a “teachable point-of-view”.

In today’s corporate lexicon, this is referred to as mentoring. A sage senior executive can provide useful feedback to a naïve junior acolyte. The best feedback will identify the individual’s successes and failures in dealing with particular leadership challenges. According to a recent survey, more than 70 per cent of the *Fortune* 500 firms deploy formal mentoring programs (*Fortune Magazine*, 2000).

Good leadership in the final analysis depends primarily on what leaders do, not on their qualities or style. Therefore, to develop potential leaders in their organizations, leaders must model leadership behavior themselves, so that staff members can actually observe leadership in action.

### Recommendations

What counsel can we offer to those who develop leadership programs? To begin with, they must be honest with potential clients. They need to acknowledge that a leadership program can provide instruction in leadership theory, expose the student to case histories, etc. – it can teach about leading, but not how to lead.

Corporate executives and consultants have generated most of the innovation in management practice. And with few exceptions, they have dominated the recent literature on leadership. The academic community, unfortunately, has yet to contribute many new paradigms for leadership or useful models for teaching leadership, although the case literature abounds with reports of organizational success and failure and the decisions taken by leaders. How can this deficiency be remedied? Researchers in the field need to:

- Establish a metric for assessing leadership effectiveness. Of course, if there is no consensus on what a leader is or what a leader does, reaching agreement on how to develop a leader is, at best, and aspiration that is difficult to satisfy.
- Develop an empirical correlation between leadership behavior and leadership qualities and outcomes. Case histories and other anecdotal reports only reinforce current mythologies.
- Design experiments that verify a causal (or statistically significant) relationship between educational and training initiatives and the development of leaders. This is a daunting task, for a leader is merely one character in a historical narrative, peopled with many other characters. Externalities often obscure the impact of the leader’s behavior, and causality is elusive. As in much of social science, only generalities may be possible (“*x* usually leads to *y*”).

The best leadership programs will focus on building skills. I suggest that the critical skill for a leader is rhetoric – characterized by Aristotle as the “persuasive marshaling of truth”[5]. In contemporary terminology, rhetoric can be taken to comprise skills in critical thinking, communications, and negotiation. These are skills that can be taught, although translating leadership skill into competency demands practice. Moreover, the athlete who learns the mechanics of the perfect golf swing or tennis stroke soon recognizes that in the context of professional competition other variables insert themselves. And leaders in one milieu cannot be expected to perform equally well in another milieu (which explains the relative ineffectiveness of simulation exercises offered in many leadership programs). Even Michael Jordan, a gifted athlete, was unable to transfer his prowess on the basketball court to the baseball diamond.

Leaders also need knowledge. They must have a context, an understanding of the industry, the market, and the economy within which the organization operates, together with an understanding of their own organization, its competencies, strengths and weaknesses, and cultural biases. This kind of knowledge can arise from study, from a cognitive process. Self-knowledge, an important complement to knowledge about the world, can come through reflection and through feedback from others[6]. Potential leaders also can learn from the experience of peers who face similar leadership challenges, as witness the extraordinary success of GE’s corporate-leadership programs at Crotonville.

For those charged with developing leaders, the selection process is critical. They need to identify those potential leaders who possess the building blocks of character, creativity, and compassion, those who also have a clear sense of purpose and the energy to pursue that purpose. Boards of directors and incumbent CEOs need to offer these apprentices leadership challenges – the opportunity to gain experience in leadership roles, to acquire the necessary knowledge, and to learn from others. And they need to provide mentoring and continuing feedback on performance. Only through this experiential process can men and women grow to be leaders.

We need more and better leaders. Conventional leadership programs miss the mark, and they pander to the organizations that are looking for better leaders. They may provide leadership literacy, but cannot develop leadership competence.

A courageous chief executive will trust his or her organization’s managers with leadership authority so that they can learn how to use it wisely. And the sooner a leader shares significant power with a new generation of managers, the sooner they will become the next generation of leaders. That subtle process of sharing power gracefully and adroitly is what makes leadership training an art.

### Notes

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, fourth century BC. Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential perspective is similar: we create ourselves by the choices we take (existence precedes essence).
2. For an extended exposition of leadership roles and responsibilities, see Allio (2004).
3. Plato, *The Republic*, fifth century BC.
4. History acknowledges the impact of many immoral leaders, like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein, and Osama Bin Laden.
5. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, fourth century BC. Aristotle regarded rhetoric as the counterpart to logic.
6. As philosopher Kant (1754) notes, self management is the necessary prerequisite to managing others.

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