

## **Leadership: Nature vs. Nurture**

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There has been a longstanding debate on whether leadership is something people are born with (nature) or developed over time (nurtured). Johnson et al. (1998) point to the studies of genetics and that leadership was a result of family history and action of genes. These studies gave rise to the “Great Man Theory” of leadership, where leaders leverage traits such as charisma, intelligence, wisdom, and other natural characteristics (Russell, 2011). Despite history being written as a biography of great men, leadership is believed to be a product of nurture rather than nature, and the skills needed to be a good leader must be developed.

One such argument is a simple cursory search for “courses on leadership” on Google. Learning platforms like Udemy and Coursera offer leadership management classes. There would be no business around teaching the subject if there wasn’t an understanding that leadership was a product of development. Besides, Clark (2015) suggests steps on becoming a leader to include recognizing one’s starting point, saying what you mean, time management, searching for hidden talents, and having meaningful conversations. These elements of leadership, as suggested by Clark (2015), once again comes from management courses, and while Clark states that becoming a good leader isn’t easy, learning along the way is imperative.

Furthering the advice of management courses on becoming a good leader, Patel (2017) admits that some leaders are gifted with traits like charisma, enthusiasm, and self-assurance, most leadership traits are learned. Some of the characteristics good leaders can learn to include self-management, acting strategically, effective communication, being accountable and responsible, setting and articulating a vision, fostering creativity and innovation, and promoting team building and teamwork. Like Clark (2015), Patel (2017) stresses that a good leader continually learns and grows.

Adding to management courses and the advice of Patel (2017), Conger (2004) provides a more balanced approach to the subject. Still, it highlights qualities such as self-confidence, achievement, drive, communication skills, and interpersonal competence that are formed

through the family environment. Furthermore, “experiences in school and college shape our career interests ...and often present our first opportunities to learn leadership first-hand” (Conger, 2011, p. 136). Research shows mentoring and coaching have more of an impact on work endeavors than “in-born talent or early-life experiences” (Conger, 2011, p. 137).

Yet, the adage “learn by doing” also plays a vital role in the development of good leaders. McCall (2004) states that “the primary source of learning to lead, to the extent that leadership can be learned, is experience” (p. 127). But not all experiences have the same impact on leadership development. Challenging assignments, exposure to other people, hardships, and personal events weight heavier on personal development than different experiences (McCall, 2004).

Another category of leaders is “reluctant leaders,” or those thrust into the role, “often as a means to an end” (Berkley, 2017, para. 5). These leaders are exemplified by veteran sports stars who mentor rookies, in social settings in deciding something to do, or just in the broader community (Berkely, 2017). These people do not intend to lead but do so out of necessity.

However, despite the strong evidence that leadership is shaped through nurture, it would be irresponsible not to discount the role of genetics entirely. Conger (2004) mentions, “genes predetermine our level of energy and our cognitive capabilities” (p. 136). Still, many argue experience, even bad experience, is valuable (Bohn, 2017). The value of experience allows people to balance emotion and cognition, increase empathy, balance expectations, anticipate the future, and have and articulate a vision – popular traits suggested for good leaders (Bohn, 2017).

Genetics, though providing individuals with the physical attributes for leadership, doesn’t compare to the value of learning and developing leadership skills. Courses online can teach some skills while reflecting on past experiences growing up within a particular family dynamic, experiences in school and at work, and hardships create a mold for people that determines the kind of leader they will be in the future.

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