# The Study of Leadership Theories: Great Leaders Are Made, Not Born

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## Summary

- ☐  To say "great leaders are born" implies that no amount of dedication to effort and perseverance is ever enough for some people to become great leaders.

- ☐  Although society expects lawyers to be leaders, few have any formal training in leadership. Instead, most lawyers learn to lead indirectly and informally.

- ☐  Studying leadership will better prepare lawyers for positions of influence and impact that come with the privilege of being a member of our honorable profession.

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> "Leadership is a journey, not a destination. It is a marathon, not a sprint. It is a process, not an outcome." —John Donahoe

To say "great leaders are born" implies that no amount of dedication to effort and perseverance is ever enough for some people to become great leaders. That simply cannot be! Leadership is not

about a particular personality, title or position. Instead, leadership is hard work, developed over time through intentionality, trial and error, and the study of human nature. Leaders must thoughtfully consider each scenario—and potential responses—before they occur. Like war games where military leaders strategize options, leaders assess what could go wrong and plan responses given the circumstances and resources. Some leaders seem to innately choose the correct action in a crisis, but more make good decisions because they're deliberative, learn from mistakes, know their team and visualize their end goals.

## Lawyers as Leaders in Society

> "We educated, privileged lawyers have a professional and moral duty to represent the underrepresented in our society, to ensure that justice exists for all, both legal and economic justice." —Justice Sonia Sotomayor

As noted in *Lawyers as Professionals and as Citizens: Key Roles and Responsibilities in the 21st Century*, lawyers traditionally have three roles: technical expert, wise counselor and effective leader. We add to that ideal for our profession by undergirding each of those roles with lawyers' ethical obligation to act with honor and integrity in all matters, and wrapping those roles with a sense of duty to society as the keepers of the rule of law. The history of the legal profession is one of service, which can at times call for self-sacrificing service.

Although society expects lawyers to be leaders, few have any formal training in leadership. Instead, most lawyers learn to lead indirectly and informally—without structure. However, just as lawyers must study their subject matter to develop expertise, leaders benefit from time spent studying leadership. The study of leadership better prepares lawyers for success in our complex, ever-evolving world, where uncertainty and change call for lawyer-leaders who can swiftly assess situations and adapt.

No single approach to leading works every time. Effective leaders select their approach for a given situation only after assessing the people involved (including themselves), the environment and the goal to be accomplished. The study of leadership teaches how to recognize different personalities, identify situations, understand relationships and strategize objectives. Studying leadership is also a time for personal introspection and growth. The more you know about your strengths, your weaknesses, your preferences and your communication styles, the more successful you will be as a problem solver for your clients and leaders within your organization.

The formal study of leadership began over a hundred years ago. Thousands of books and articles describe leadership theories, and "as many as 65 different classifications systems have been developed to define the dimensions of leadership." In *Fundamentals of Lawyer Leadership*, we sorted those theories into three categories: 1. Attributes of the leader (i.e., traits, characteristics, behaviors, actions and styles). 2. Skills and competencies necessary to complete tasks and achieve objectives. 3. Relationships or interactions between the leader and followers.

Studying leadership from all three perspectives frames the issues and approaches from a variety of angles and better prepares leaders for future challenges.

## Study of Personal Attributes of Leaders

The statement, "Leaders are born, not made" reveals common biases about personal attributes the public expects to see in leaders. For example, a body of social science evidence demonstrates that the public perceives tall, white men as more persuasive and capable as leaders. If leaders are tall, but you are not, the odds are stacked against you because you were born height challenged. No wonder the first attempts to study "great" leader- ship in the early 20th century concentrated on the common "innate qualities and characteristics possessed by great social, political and military leaders (e.g., Catherine the Great, Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Joan of Arc and Napoleon Bonaparte)."

In *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Peter Northouse summarized leadership studies conducted over the last hundred years, focusing on 25 different characteristics from six major studies. Northouse highlights five traits as central to leadership: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability. Note that height, gender, race and other common biases are not included. While effective leadership derives from more than a common set of personal attributes, taking inventory of your own traits, characteristics and natural inclinations is an important first step. The better you know yourself, the better you can plan, predict and change responses and outcomes.

## Study of Skills and Competencies of Leaders

In the 1940s, researchers began studying the impact of leaders' behaviors rather than their traits. They examined what leaders do and found that leaders acted in one of two ways. Some leaders concentrated on the work by addressing technical aspects of production and created systems for organization and efficiency. Others focused on relationships with employees, taking time to nurture them and recognize their value and contributions. This built camaraderie, mutual respect and trust.

A 1955 article in the *Harvard Business Review* promoted a view of leadership as a set of skills that can be acquired and developed through effort. In other words, leaders can be made. Then in the 1990s, skills-based approaches emerged to focus on capabilities. By gaining knowledge and developing beneficial skills (capabilities), people can improve their effectiveness as leaders. Leaders were encouraged to work on individual attributes (i.e., cognitive ability, motivation and personality), build competencies (such as problem-solving skills, social judgment skills and knowledge), learn from previous experience and use available resources efficiently.

## Modern Leadership Approaches Consider Circumstances and Relationships

Modern approaches consider the individual's strengths and weaknesses in relationship to the team and the goal. These approaches include:

**Situational leadership.** As the name suggests, the leader acts based on the situation by evaluating the team's competence for, and commitment to, the task at hand. The task may call for detailed instructions, or team members may need more direct supervision. In a different situation, the team might be self-directed and enthusiastic either because of the task or the team's composition.

**Transactional leadership.** The leader tells group members what to do and when, using a system of rewards and punishments to motivate followers. In this quid pro quo environment, behavior is bartered. Businesses reward successful employees with bonuses and "employee of the month" accolades. Motivation involves rewards and is outcome driven, and the ends justify the means. Failure results in reprimands or other punishment.

**Transformational leadership.** These leaders influence others by creating a connection through intellectual stimulation. They encourage their team members to think about problems and issues creatively, looking for innovation to change outdated or dysfunctional processes or systems. Research indicates that this high-energy and creative environment can have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of both the followers and the leaders. Transformational leaders inspire by providing meaning and challenge to the work. They involve team members emotionally with the shared vision.

**Authentic leadership.** While "[a]uthenticity has been explored throughout history, from Greek philosophers to the work of Shakespeare," authentic leader- ship as a modern management science gained acceptance with the book *Authentic Leadership*. The book described five basic qualities found in authentic leaders, each of which is associated with an observable characteristic: purpose and passion, values and behavior, relationships and connectedness, self-discipline and consistency, and heart and compassion.

**Servant leadership.** This approach originated in the writings of Robert Greenleaf in 1970 as a theoretical framework advocating for a leader's primary motivation to be serving others. Servant leaders strive to create a better society by modeling selfless, ethical service to others for the greater good. By putting their followers' needs first, servant leaders hope their followers serve society at large in a similar fashion. Greenleaf's servant leadership emphasized 10 core personal attributes: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community.

**Adaptive leadership.** These follower-centered leaders focus on both situations and relationships to "mobiliz[e] a group of individuals to handle tough challenges and emerge triumphant in the end." The adaptive leader helps individuals or a group explore their values, change priorities and behaviors to address a challenge, or to improve and grow. It is the equivalent of teaching someone to fish rather than giving him a fish.

**Leader-member exchange theory.** These leaders' relationship with their followers depends on whether the follower is a member of the leader's inner circle, or "in-group." In-group members often have close working relationships with the leader, and they may have similar or complementary personalities. By contrast, the leader's relationship with out- group members is more detached and conforms closely to formal job descriptions and hierarchical lines of communication. In law firms, in-group members are more likely to get the best assignments, receive bigger bonuses, advance through the partnership track faster and be invited to join the partner at the client's house in Vail.

Leader-member exchange theory has important implications for diversity and inclusion efforts. This type of in-crowd approach can keep a "good ol' boys' club" leadership structure in law firms, giving an inside track to those most like the leader. Minorities, women and LGBTQ+ people likely make up the majority of the out-group members. A leader's cultural intelligence will enable the leader to identify and dismantle barriers and find ways to connect with all members so that each individual feels valued.

## Studying Leadership Approaches Creates a Tool Kit

> "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other." —John F. Kennedy

Studying leadership creates a tool kit of options to better equip you for future challenges. Being able to recognize which approach fits you better, and which may be more appropriate in certain

situations, will allow you to be more skilled in choosing, adapting and modifying your approach as the circumstances dictate. Some leadership approaches overlap or are complementary and can be used in conjunction with one another. For example, transformational leadership may inspire employees with a new vision, but someone has to actualize a plan and implement the transactional steps to get there.

To get you started, we offer these steps: 1. Study leaders you admire and those whose failures you want to avoid! You can learn as much from the mistakes of others as you can from your own. 2. Identify your own strengths and abilities. 3. Assess your tendencies. 4. Identify specific situations you are concerned about navigating. 5. Be willing to try new approaches until you find those that fit you and effectively address the people you serve and the situations you encounter.

Studying leadership will better prepare lawyers for positions of influence and impact that come with the privilege of being a member of our honorable profession. Through representation and interactions each day, lawyers can positively influence clients, colleagues and other professionals. Through service and leadership, lawyers have the opportunity to meaningfully impact individuals, organizations and communities. Through the study of leadership, you will gain knowledge, enhance skills and develop strategies that will serve you well in the practice of law *and* help you find purpose and meaning through your service. Through your influence and impact, you will make a difference!

## Endnotes

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**ABA** American Bar Association