

Asking Whether Leaders Are Born or Made Is the Wrong Question

by Connson Chou Locke

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Are leaders born or made? When I pose this question to executives or HR professionals, the vast majority say that leaders are made; that is, leadership is something one can learn. Yet researchers have found traits, such as extraversion and intelligence, which differentiate leaders from others. This seems to imply that we can identify future leaders by looking at their traits – but we must be cautious when drawing such conclusions.

By failing to differentiate between leadership *effectiveness* (performance as a leader) and leadership *emergence* (being tapped for a leadership role), this research is often misunderstood and misused. In fact, inborn traits are more strongly associated with leadership emergence. That is, within a group of peers, those who are more extraverted or more intelligent tend to have more influence on the group. Does this mean that these same people perform better than others when placed in a formal position of leadership? Not necessarily.

Let's look at the relationship between extraversion and leadership effectiveness. Some studies have found a relationship, but it is so weak that it is difficult to draw conclusions from it. A much stronger relationship has been found when looking only at particular types of jobs: extraversion predicts performance in jobs with a competitive social component; for example, sales. And if we look at extraversion in more depth, it can also predict other less desirable outcomes such as absenteeism.

What about intelligence and leadership effectiveness? Again, the relationship is surprisingly weak and can be disrupted easily. For example, if the leader is under stress, then it is no longer possible to predict the leader's performance by looking at his/her intelligence. It seems that stress makes people behave in unpredictable – and perhaps less intelligent – ways. Interestingly, there is a far stronger relationship between leaders' perceived intelligence (how intelligent they look to others) and how likely they are to be chosen as a leader than there is between actual intelligence and leadership. Apparently, when it comes to leadership, appearances are everything.

So are leaders born or made? What is this question really asking? If it is asking whether someone will emerge as a leader among a group of peers, then those types of leaders are born. But if it is asking whether someone will perform effectively in a leadership position, then that is dependent on the context, the type of job, and the person's ability to develop leadership skills. This cannot be predicted by their traits.

Unfortunately, we often choose our leaders based on traits such as extraversion, charisma, and intelligence (or perceived intelligence). And then we wonder why their performance does not live up to our expectations.

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