

Learning Is the Master Skill

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Meet “*The Truth About Leadership*” authors Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner at The Leadership Challenge Forum in San Diego in August. Visit their website at: <http://www.leadershi...Section/id-400350.html>

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“Are leaders born or made?” It’s a question we get asked nearly every time we give a speech or conduct a workshop. Our answer? We’ve never met a leader who wasn’t born! We’ve also never met an accountant, artist, athlete, engineer, lawyer, physician, writer, or zoologist who wasn’t born. We’re all born. That’s a given. It’s what you do with what you have before you die that makes the difference.

Yet, as straightforward as that sounds, not everyone believes it. An insidious myth persists in our technologically advanced world, that leadership—and many other abilities, for that matter—is reserved for only a lucky few.

So, let’s get something straight from the start. Leadership is not preordained. It is not a gene, and it is not a trait. There is no hard evidence to support the assertion that leadership is imprinted in the DNA of only some individuals and that the rest of us missed out and are doomed to be clueless.

We’ve told this truth more times than we can count over the last 30 years, from our first book, “*The Leadership Challenge*,” to our newest, “*The Truth about Leadership*”. Leadership, like all skills worth having, can be learned—and must be practiced.

The truth is that the best leaders are the best learners. Leadership is an observable pattern of practices and behaviors, and a definable set of skills and abilities. Skills can be learned, and when we track the progress of people who participate in leadership development programs we observe that they improve over time.^[1] They learn to be better leaders as long as they engage in activities that help them learn how. The same thing is true for the other roles people play in organizations—and in life.

But here’s the rub. While leadership can be learned, not everyone learns it, and not all those who learn leadership master it. Why? Because to master leadership you have to have a strong desire to excel, you have to believe strongly that you can learn new skills and abilities, and you have to be willing to devote yourself to continuous learning and deliberate practice.

Learning is the Master Skill

Over the years we've conducted a series of empirical studies to find out whether leaders could be differentiated by the range and depth of learning tactics they employ. We've wanted to know if how leaders learned played a role in how effective they were in leading. The results have been most intriguing. First, we found that leadership can be learned in a variety of ways. It can be learned through active experimentation, observation of others, study in the classroom or reading books, or simply reflecting on one's own and others' experiences.[\[ii\]](#) Certain styles contribute to more effectiveness in some practices, but there is no one best style for learning everything there is to know. The style was not the thing.

What was more important was the extent to which individuals engaged in whatever style worked for them. Those leaders who were more engaged in each of their learning styles, regardless of what their styles were, scored higher on our measures of leadership practices. The best leaders turned out to be the best learners. This same observation can be applied to any skill-set you can name.

Learning comes first. When people are predisposed to be curious and want to learn something new, they are much more likely to get better at it than those who don't become fully engaged.

Learning is the master skill. When you fully engage in learning—when you throw yourself whole-heartedly into experimenting, reflecting, reading, or getting coaching—you are going to experience the thrill of improvement and the taste of success. More is more when it comes to learning.

Deliberate Practice Is Required

There's another pervasive myth that has captivated the training and development world over the last few years. It's the myth of talent, and some have come to accept it as the new gospel. If only we search far and wide enough, and long and hard enough, we'll be able to identify the right person for the right job at the right time. No training required; just find the right person. Well, good luck with that.

Florida State University professor and noted authority on expertise, K. Anders Ericsson, makes this point:

Until most individuals recognize that sustained training and effort is a prerequisite for reaching expert levels of performance, they will continue to misattribute lesser achievement to the lack of natural gifts, and will thus fail to reach their own potential.[\[iii\]](#)

Anders and his colleagues have found, over the 25 years of their research, that raw talent is not all there is to becoming a top performer. It doesn't matter whether it's in sports,

music, medicine, computer programming, mathematics, or other fields; talent is not the key that unlocks excellence.

What truly differentiates the expert performers from the good performers is hours of practice. You've got to work at becoming the best, and it sure doesn't happen over a weekend. If you want a rough metric of what it takes to achieve the highest level of expertise, the estimate is about 10,000 hours of practice over a period of ten years.[\[iv\]](#) That's about 2.7 hours a day, every day, for ten years!

These days you also hear a lot about how you should ignore your weaknesses, or you should find someone else who's good at what you aren't and partner with them. While it may be decent operational advice, that message is not consistent with what those who study expertise have found. Researchers have shown, across a variety of occupations and professions, that only by working at what you *can't do* can you expect to become the expert you aspire to be.[\[v\]](#)

If you want to be the best you can be you will have to attend to your weaknesses. You can't delegate or assign to others those skills you aren't good at. If you do, you'll only get as good as your weakest skill. While you may never get as good as someone else at everything you do, by constantly practicing, practicing, and practicing you can improve. And you'll also gain an appreciation for why persistence is another one of those attributes that differentiates the best from the also-rans.

So, here's the mantra for the twenty-first century learner: no matter how good I am, I can always get better. The secret to success is persistent, unrelenting, dedicated, and deliberate practice.

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