Goal: Tell people to stop thinking about the debate between generalists and specialists. Find what you’re passionate about and build on it, in order to be leader.

Who are tomorrow’s leaders? Those that know a little about a lot, or those that know a lot about a little? By the way, the two types of people I just mentioned have names. The former is a generalist. The latter is a specialist. While not a rule, a manager in a large corporation with an MBA might be a generalist, and a scientist in a government research lab with a PhD might be a specialist. The debate between the merits of a generalist and specialist is age-old, and both sides seem to have an argument.

The thing is, if you look online for a form of this debate today, you’ll find several articles arguing for the increased importance of the generalist in today’s globalized world [1]. One particular article by the Harvard Business Review titled “All Hail the Generalist” [2] argues that generalists have an added edge to be leaders, primarily because they can see the bigger picture, adapt to a changing environment, and promote team building – all of which are important leadership qualities in an increasingly globalized world. Yet, not too many articles exist that make this same case for *specialists*; can’t specialists be leaders too, even if they don't have the training that instills these leadership qualities? In the below, I hope to show you that they can, by showing how a specialist, e.g. a scientist of a government research laboratory, can use her strengths to take on a leadership role typically assigned to a generalist, e.g., an executive manager of a large company.

1. Seeing the bigger picture: Most scientific publications are judged by novelty. To assess novelty, scientists must usually do a literature search in order to be aware of other work in the neighborhood of their research area. The skill of learning about and relating other work to their own can be applied in an executive management position, where constantly assessing competitors’ products is necessary for the company to successfully deliver their products to their customers.

2. Adapting to a changing environment: In carrying out a scientific experiment, scientists almost always must acquire an ability to learn *how* to learn. For example, the discovery process of a new biological virus involves learning how to use new lab equipment or learning a new chemistry equation. A scientist’s skill of learning how to learn while carrying out experiments can be replicated in an executive management position, where the impact of a sudden drop in housing prices to customer demand needs be assessed quickly in order adapt the goals of the company to satisfy this new customer demand.   
3. Being a team-builder: Cross-lab collaborations form a big part of working together in research lab. It's often up to the scientists to s*eek out* these collaborations, and this involves networking. Once a collaboration has been formed, it involves finding a way to work as a team, bringing the best of each person’s strengths to make the collaboration work effectively. These skills acquired in research collaborations can be transferred to an executive management position, where teaming up the right people and synergizing their abilities is critical to sustained productivity of the company.

As can be seen, the skills a scientist already has can be used in the context of a leadership role.

There’s a much bigger point here, and it’s not about whether it’s today’s PhDs or MBAs that will define the trends of tomorrow. With the advent of online courses and degrees, there are a myriad of opportunities for skill development for those who never had them. Thus, those who make a difference tomorrow may not have a PhD, MBA, or any certification whatsoever, and instead might be the ones that can quickly find strengths within themselves, and use their strengths to their advantage in any situation. And if this is the case, then to be a leader in tomorrow’s world, we need to be thankful for what we have rather than regretful of what we don’t, focus on the few things that make us happy rather than a dozen that make us satisfied, and build upon our accomplishments rather than make up for our setbacks. In other words, we should recognize the best of what we already have and make it even better, rather than thinking about and fixing what we don’t. Once we focus on what we already have within us, we are more likely to also turn what we don’t have into what we do, just as the scientist above uses what she already has to her advantage to rise up to the challenge of an executive management position.

To those high school seniors trying to be part of every club this year to look as well-rounded as their peers on their college applications, maybe go back to that school-wide competition you randomly decided to do in junior year and got 3rd place in – and see if you can get 1st place in the division-wide competition this year. To those at the tail end of college trying to fix their cumulative GPAs to make up for freshman year grades in order to avoid having to explain their GPA to prospective employers, maybe think again about that final project report you aced that made your professor give you an A+ instead of the expected B- – and see if you can publish that report in a top-tier conference. To those currently working but thinking they need to get a graduate degree to get a promotion, maybe think again about that shell script you spent an entire weekend on, which not only freed up your next 4 weekends, but also made you twice as productive at work for the rest of the year and ultimately got you that big raise -- and see if you can get that script to top the 10,000-download-mark on sourceforge. Because if you work to find your inherent strengths and build upon them, rather than continually trying to get more certifications and validations from the world, you might just find that being a leader in tomorrow’s world is only a couple steps further.