

Leadership FAQs

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Missive 3

the
issue

Can I *Learn* to be a Leader, or Do I Have to Be *Born* One?

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Leader? What do you mean by "leader?"

Are leaders born or made? That depends on what you mean by "leader." Burt Nanus and Warren Bennis report over 300 definitions of "leadership" offered by researchers! Jay Conger follows John Kotter's lead by defining leadership with three basic dimensions:

1. Establishing direction for a working group of individuals...
2. Gaining commitment from these group members to this direction... and
3. Motivating these members to achieve the outcomes of the direction.

According to this view, "leadership" can be exercised by anyone at any level of an organization in any (or all) of these dimensions.

Are leaders born or made? ANSWER: Yes!

The current consensus is that good leaders are a little of **both**. In the majority of cases, inherited traits, birth order, and early family experiences play a significant role in establishing and developing the personality and the character needs that motivate an individual to lead. These factors also contribute to the development of the intellectual and interpersonal skills essential to effective leadership.

But... LIFE contributes greatly to the development of a leader! Work experiences, hardships, challenges, opportunities, education, mentors and role models – all add significantly to the equation of leadership effectiveness.

Don't knock "hard knocks" learning...

Current research (and consensus by those producing it) suggests that experiences on the job play an important catalytic role in unlocking leader behavior. There seems to be no substitute for learning through doing, making mistakes and improving with time. John Kotter surveyed 200 executives at highly successful companies and interviewed 12 key individuals in depth. Kotter's research suggests some things that you can do to be more intentional and strategic about your own leadership growth and development. Try this countdown of practical ideas...

5 – Look for good places to be.

All opportunities are NOT created equal. Some places, workgroups, divisions, departments are better than others. HOW? They offer more challenging assignments, better colleagues, broader exposure, and more effective "coaching" by superiors. Keep all these things in mind when you go looking for a place to "land."

4 – Look for good people to see.

I'm talking about mentors and role models. Keep your eyes open to "look and learn." Take the initiative to build relationships with mentors who can help you learn from their experiences; overcome your blind spots; avoid leadership "land mines" (mistakes that can seriously "wound" your career); and help you "steer" your own career and personal development.

3 – Take the bull by the horns.

Volunteer for the tough jobs that everyone else avoids. It's a no-lose venture. To begin with, you will be doing exactly what you need to do to grow and learn – you will be "broadening" your leadership experience with a challenging

assignment. But... even if you do a so-so job, everyone will be singing your praises. Why? Because you took the job that no one else wanted! Finally... you will create instant visibility for your leadership, and that's important - because people don't promote what they don't notice!

2 – "Team up" for leadership

success. Join a task force that's taking on a special assignment. You will win several ways – you will learn stuff outside the "box" of your limited job assignment; you will work with colleagues who will expose you to their gifts, skills, and strengths; you will be more likely to succeed (and less likely to fail) by sharing the assignment with others; and... you will be noticed! (Most task forces are given high-profile assignments from top brass!)

1 – Milk the management for

formal training. Most companies offer training opportunities or incentives of some kind. Take advantage of them! Here's an important caveat, though – *not all training opportunities are created equal!* How do you spot the good ones from the not-so-good ones? That's our topic for the next edition of *Leadership FAQ's* - stay tuned for some good advice!

This edition of *Leadership FAQ's* has been adapted from a more detailed article, which includes additional references and sources. You can find this article at the following website:

http://www.biola.edu/academics/scs/leadership/born_made.cfm

The Grace Center
For Leadership Development
www.leadershipfaq.com