

Are Leaders Born?

By Henry S. Givray



Leadership is the most powerful human force. It can be the spark, fuel and engine to do good, correct wrongs, unite people, effect positive change, unleash human potential, ignite breakthrough ideas, create better tomorrows, and leave footprints on other people's hearts. For these reasons and more, I have been a passionate, life-long student of leadership.

Over the years I have had numerous opportunities to speak about leadership at association conferences, corporate meetings and educational forums attended by diverse audiences, including business executives, professionals and students. Early in my presentation, I ask attendees to choose which of four statements about leadership they believe to be most true. Invariably, one-quarter to one-third of the group pick, "Leaders are born." During one session, a person quipped, "Well Henry, they aren't hatched!"



Fair enough. Though I could have worded it differently, the classic question stands. Does becoming a leader require certain innate talents and attributes? And if you don't possess them at birth, does that mean it's impossible (or at least quite difficult) for you to become a leader? Moreover, if you are gifted with those talents and attributes, does that mean you will automatically (or easily) become a leader? Answering these related questions requires further exploration and greater understanding of what leadership is and what it is not.

For instance, it's common and acceptable to equate the word "leader" with anyone in a position of authority, status or power. When referring to such individuals, we use leader as a noun preceded by an adjective describing their field, profession or role: *executive leader*, *political leader*, *religious leader*, *industry leader*, *company leader*, *world leader* or *volunteer leader*, to name a few examples. Doing this, however, diminishes and trivializes leadership's true meaning. It implies leadership is simply or mostly about position, authority, professional acclaim, fame, popularity, or a combination of any of these aspects. Based on that, we may conclude that those who do not desire, seek or otherwise attain positions of authority or power may be lacking some innate qualities.

But the truth is that leadership is not something that can be bestowed upon or granted to you merely because of your skills, gained experience, accumulated knowledge, or celebrated professional achievements. You can't grab, control or buy leadership. In fact, leadership is *invited* and can only be given willingly by others based on who you are, what you do and how you do it. And leadership is revealed by what you inspire and what you enable. By inspire, I mean being able to elicit positive emotions, behaviors and actions *in* others – such as trust, hope and engagement – without the promise of a reward or threat of punishment. In the context of leadership,

to enable is to produce tangible outcomes *through* others including desired annual results, individual and organizational growth, and change, whether what's required is incremental or transformational.

Regardless of position or title, you earn leadership's invitation when others truly agree to be led by you. And you deliver on leadership's promise when you make a lasting, positive impact on the lives of people and on the

success and long-term vitality of the organization you serve. Therefore, when combined with a position or role descriptor, the word "leader" should be the adjective, not the noun – *leader executive*, *leader politician*, *leader businessperson*, *leader religious person*, *leader volunteer* – and only used if the referenced individual is a true leader: someone who has earned leadership's invitation and delivered on its promise.

Swimmers who compete at the highest level are typically born with certain physical attributes including above average height, a long torso, broad shoulders and long arms. However, just because you are born with these physical characteristics certainly doesn't mean you will win an Olympic gold medal. Similarly, you may be gifted with certain attributes commonly associated with leadership such as charisma, an outgoing personality, risk taking, eloquence, confidence and comfort with conflict. Being born with these characteristics may give you an edge in attaining a sought-after position of authority or power but they won't guarantee you become a true leader – not by a long shot. Examples of leadership failures abound – and some are breathtaking – in business, politics, government, nonprofit sectors, academia and in virtually all other field and professions where so-called "born leaders" get hired, appointed or elected to positions of power and authority.





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Ultimately, three interconnected and integrated personal factors will determine your success in earning leadership’s invitation and delivering on its promise. They are:

- 1. Character Traits** – your values and core beliefs as evidenced by both words and actions. True leaders embody certain character traits including uncompromised integrity, authentic humility, a high-degree of self-awareness, service to others above self-interest, a steadfast work ethic, accountability and tough-minded optimism. No doubt our genetic predisposition can influence who we are or could be. But by far and away character is shaped by our experiences and the choices we make. In the end, as human beings we are self-determining and decide the values we choose, the beliefs we hold and the assumptions we make.
- 2. Competencies** – your innate talents, developed skills, accumulated knowledge and gained experience. True leaders possess and develop specific competencies such as speaking and writing, managing self and others, driving change, listening, resolving conflict, observing non-verbal cues, making judgment calls, thinking critically, solving problems and building cohesive teams, among many others. Though one may have natural strength in certain areas, anyone can develop and acquire the skills necessary to become a true leader. And as far as accumulating knowledge and gaining experience, it’s up to us to set the level of our desire and the depth of our commitment.
- 3. Behaviors & Practices** – how you act, react and conduct yourself with and toward others and in situations; what you do and how you do it repeatedly and reliably. True leaders consistently demonstrate particular behaviors & practices like exhibiting resilience and stamina, surfacing and confronting conflict, readily giving trust, always delivering on promises, actively learning, continuous and deliberate self-reflecting and self-examining, and of course connecting their choices, decisions and actions to their values and core beliefs.

How we behave and what we practice are under our complete control. In fact, the only thing for which we have 100 percent control is ourselves.

Certainly, our innate wiring can play a role in our ability to earn leadership’s invitation and deliver on its promise. But our inherited talents and attributes are neither guarantees nor inhibitors in our ultimate success. In the end, true leaders choose and exemplify certain character traits, continuously develop and sharpen specific competencies, and demonstrate and hone particular behaviors & practices – all of which they do not only consciously, but also with purpose and conviction.

So in the leadership nature vs. nurture debate, most who come down on the side of nurture say that leaders are made, not born. But renowned management consultant, educator and author, Peter F. Drucker, put an even finer point on things when he said, “Leaders grow; they are not made.” I couldn’t agree more. The fact is, no simple formulas or prescriptions exist on how to become a true leader, only timeless principles and essential concepts. Learning and successfully applying them, however, requires a never-ending journey of active engagement, self-discovery and personal growth. •

Henry S. Givray is former Chairman, President & CEO of Smithbucklin Corporation, the world’s largest association management and services company. He served as President & CEO from 2002 to 2015 and Chairman of the Board (non-executive) from 2016 to 2020. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and national news media, and he has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings, and educational forums. One of Henry’s most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings under the brand Leadership’s Calling®. The Diverse Cohort Program is for CEOs and other C-suite executives, vice presidents, directors and managers at all levels, business owners, entrepreneurs, individual practitioners, and high-potentials from all types and sizes of organizations representing varied industries and professions. The second offering is an exclusive program for a CEO (or head of an organization) and members of his or her senior management team, participating together.