

# Leadership between skill and competency

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**Abstract:** *The following paper aims to present the way in which leaders are made up in nowadays, and which are the big differences between a born leader and a person that is working hard every day to become one. The history is full of examples of true leaders, but the present has shown to us that leaders can also be created in time. The purpose of this article is to bring up front examples of leadership and also methods through which you can practice your skills and gain competency in leading people.*

**Key words:** leaders, leadership, skill, competency, education

## I. Introduction

Leadership is defined as the activity of leading a group of people or an organization or the ability to do this. Leadership involves establishing a clear vision, sharing that vision with others so that they will follow willingly, providing the information, knowledge and

methods to realize that vision, and coordinating and balancing the conflicting interests of all members and stakeholders. A leader steps up in times of crisis, and is able to think and act creatively in difficult situations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/leadership.html>

Even, over time, people tried to find out the perfect recipe for becoming a leader, there still are many questions, and things left unspoken. Leadership evolves and changes in the same time with people and technology. Leaders from the past could not face the challenges from nowadays. In time, the concept of leading people received so many definition, was seen from so different perspectives and analyzed in so many situations and environments, that we still wonder: **Are leaders born or made?**

Warren Bennis, Burt Nanus, James O'Toole, Stephen Covey, Max DePree, John W. Gardner are only some of the great authors that tried through their writings to answer to that question, but after so many years of research and studies, opinions are more than ever split.

Is leadership a skill? A trait that we are born with, and that evolves in the same time with us, reaching out in the moments of need? Many philosophers developed theories based on the inherited abilities of people, and they stand by their ideas arguing that leadership is about talent, gut, aptitude or endowment.

Or is leadership a competence? Something that you work on every day, that you read about and apply in real life, in order to become competent in your own field? There are researchers that argue the fact that leadership is a talent, saying that this concept is more complex than just a genetic gift.

In the following three chapters I will try to come up with some examples of theories, leaders from the past and leaders from nowadays in order to get a more clear perspective over this concept, and also some methods to help the wannabe leaders of today.

## II. Leadership in the past

Since the first leader borne, philosophers tried to find out which are the main characteristics or traits that a leader possess in order to make others to follow him. Over the decades, eight major theories have been developed:

- **The Great Man Theory** – which sustain the idea that leaders are born, not made, and that they will arise when there is a great need. This theory was proposed by Thomas Carlyle, and his research was based on the study of people who were already great leaders like: Jesus, Mohammed, Moses, Buddha, Churchill etc.

- **The Trait Theory** – says that some people born with particular inherited traits which suit to leadership. Stodgill, McCall and Lombardo were the philosophers that promoted this theory. They have based their studies on families of powerful men.

- **The Behavioral Theory** – stands by the idea that leaders can be made, rather than are born. Researchers like McClelland, Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lipitt, Robert Blake and Jane Mouton were the ones that expanded this theory. They didn't search the traits, but the actions that make a person a leader.

- **Participative Leadership Theory** – assume that leaders involve in their decision-making process other people. In this way people are less competitive and more collaborative. This approach is also known as consultation, empowerment, joint decision-making, democratic leadership, Management by Objective (MBO) and power-sharing.<sup>2</sup>This theory was developed by Lewin, Lippit and Likert.

<sup>2</sup>[http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/styles/participative\\_leadership.htm](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/styles/participative_leadership.htm)

- **Situational Leadership Theory** - The best action of the leader depends on a range of situational factors like the motivation and capability of followers, the leader's perception, stress, mood etc.<sup>3</sup> Hersey and Blanchard suggest that leaders should adapt their own style to the followers; Vroom and Yetton on the other hand propose that the followers should stand by the leader and accept his decisions; Path-Goal theory describe a collaborative relationship between the leader and the followers, and that they should encourage and support each other.

- **Contingency Theory** – similar to the Situational Theory, emphasis the fact that The leader's ability to lead is contingent upon various situational factors, including the leader's preferred style, the capabilities and behaviors of followers and also various other situational factor.<sup>4</sup> This approach was developed by Fiedler.

- **Transactional Leadership Theory** – according this theory people are motivated by reward and punishment, and a clear chain of command is the proper way of organizing a system. It is based on Pavlov and Skinner's studies.

- **Transformational Leadership Theory** – assume the fact that people will follow a person who inspires them, a person with vision and passion who can lead them in the wright direction, and can help them achieve great things. Bernard M. Bass and James MacGregor Burns introduced this concept.

Across history leaders arise every time they were needed. In the ancient history, when people where fighting for territories we

<sup>3</sup>[http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/styles/situational\\_leadership.htm](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/styles/situational_leadership.htm)

<sup>4</sup>[http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/theories/contingency\\_theory.htm](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/theories/contingency_theory.htm)

can look up at leaders like Caesar, Cleopatra, Alexander the Great, Plato, Galileo Galilee, Archimedes and the list could continue. They were examples of comportsment, of thinking, of courage, of virtuosity and people were follow them willingly, in many cases with the cost of their lives.

As previously during, when territories became countries others leaders arisen. For example in America we can find Abraham Lincoln, in France Napoleon who is a very outstanding example of leadership, In England the queen Elizabeth etc. During the World War I and the World War II, the much known leaders were Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman.

Most of the historical leaders we know tend to be military or political. They are people who stood out as incredibly unique; as if no one else contributed to their success – standalone, one-of-a-kind leaders who seemed to achieve everything singlehandedly and were certainly the driving force behind events. Those sorts of leaders will continue to exist. They will be remembered as uniquely fitting into their time and circumstances, to form a seemingly perfect match for the needs of the moment.<sup>5</sup>

But, in nowadays people ask for a different type of leader. Since the Industrial Revolution from the early 1800's, a new field attracted the people attention: economy. The new leaders don't plan anymore strategic attacks over the enemy's army, but plans strategies of developing a business, of gaining market shares, of attracting customers and improving the commerce, which is one of the oldest activities of humankind. The

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hrreporter.com/blog/strategic-hr/archive/2011/06/13/inspired-by-leaders-of-the-past>

new leaders don't develop projects which involve resources like soldiers, guns, cannons; instead they use human resources and prime materials to create products that are required on the market. They don't negotiate territories or alliances, but contracts, prices or mergers. And the most important, they are not followed anymore by an entire nation, but by their employees.

The new leaders were inspired by the military and political persons. They —stolell from them the way of organizing resources and time, the strategic thinking, the ways of inspiring their followers, their ways of setting objectives and so on, and tried to adapt all of that tactics to the new field. One of the most representative book that sustain this idea is —The art of warll written by Sun Tzu.

But if the past leaders were born, what makes the new leaders stand out in the crowd and determine people, in time of peace, to follow them?

### III. Leadership in present

The concept of present leadership hasn't changed that much. The definition remains the same, but the methods and principles of becoming a leader have evolved. Today we embrace all theories of leadership, we agree that some leaders are born and some are made up in time, but we sustain that no matter the source of the leading power we still have to work hard on developing our set of abilities and talents.

In times of economic crisis people tend to look up to their leaders. They need to know that there is a person who will help them pass through rough times, that will inspire and motivated them that will offer financial security and that will lead them on the right path.

John Kotter, author and leadership expert at Harvard, states that the role of the leader is to define what the future looks like, align people with that vision, and inspire them to make it happen despite obstacles. After all, implicit in the word *lead* is the notion of *going somewhere*.<sup>6</sup>

Today's leaders have more different roles. They don't represent only a nation, they stand up for a multicultural and a multinational organization. They don't just set an objective for the entire group, they have to be collaborative and match individual goals with the company's ones. They have to involve everybody in the organization in the decision making process, in order to show to every person how important they are to the organization. He also has to be a friend, a mentor or a philosopher if the situation requires to. From my point of view, leaders nowadays have to struggle, to learn every day, to develop their own traits in order to face all the challenges that they will confront. Even they are born or made, the education process is very important for their formation. They have to show they possess a multiple sets of intelligence as Howard Gardner describes them.

A leader should have a very precise set of values, so that he can offer to his followers a stable work environment, but in the same time he should be versatile, ready to embrace the change, to shift, to adjust and to make needed organizational changes, and show that he can be trusted. Honesty, integrity, consistency, congruency, reliability are other some characteristic that he should possess. And it's possible that some of these traits were inherited from family, some need to be

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.collegiateproject.com/articles/Todays%20Leadership%20Challenge.pdf>

developed through education and some may not exist. We all possess the capacity for leadership, but only those who cultivate it will ever become truly effective leaders.

So how do you developed or actually gain different abilities? Can we teach people to become leaders? Can we teach leadership?

Many people think the education should represent a huge part in developing our leadership talent. So institutions like schools, high-schools and universities are going to focus their attention into this matter, but there are still some obstacles in the way.

**First**, there are people who still believe and sustain the idea that leaders are born, or that they are a product of some circumstances, and that there is no way you can teach leadership.

**Second**, the complaint that leadership training would more than likely be preoccupied with skills, techniques, and the means of getting things done. But leadership for what?

**Third**, leadership isn't a skill that you can anatomize on your table, is more a practical ability that you can only achieve at the work, in summer jobs, internships or NGOs where you will have a mentor to help you learn step by step.

**Fourth**, leading people usually can become easily manipulating people, and Stalin and Hitler stand as examples for this fact.

**Fifth**, colleges and universities are increasingly organized in highly specialized divisions and department all geared to train specialists. While the mission of the college may be to educate "the educated person" and society's future leaders, in fact the incentive system is geared to training specialists. Society today rewards the expert or the super specialist – the data processors, the pilots, the financial whiz, the heart surgeon, the special

team punt returners, and so on. Leaders, however, have to learn to become generalists and usually have to do so well after they have left our colleges, graduate schools and professional schools.<sup>7</sup>

**Sixth**, leadership is highly situational and contextual. Some leaders can be great in a field, but fail in another.

**Seventh**, leadership has its basis in creativity. But how you can teach creativity?

So what is left to do?

Well, we still have the literature, the books that great professors written, in order to give us some tools to learn how to make other listen, trust, follow us. Some examples of great writers are:

- Warren Bennis Professor of Business Administration, University of Southern California; author of —On Becoming a LeaderII;

- Burt Nanus, Professor Emeritus of Management at the University of Southern California's School of Business Administration, former Director of Research at USC's Leadership Institute and co-author with Warren Bennis of Leaders : The Strategies for Taking Charge;

- James O'Toole, former Vice President of the Aspen Institute and Director of the Leadership Institute at USC;

- Stephen Covey, author of the bestselling The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People in which he introduced the philosophy of 'people-centered leadership' and more recently 'principle-centered leadership';

- Max DePree, retired CEO of Herman Miller Inc, and author Leadership Jazz;

- John W Gardner, formerly US Secretary of Health, Education and welfare,

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/reflections\\_on\\_leadership.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/reflections_on_leadership.htm)

an advisor to six Presidents and Professor of Business at Stanford University. Author of *On Leadership*.

For example in Kerry Bunker vision there are six areas that you should focus on in order to develop your ability to lead:

- *Manage the change, but lead the transition.* You should connect with your followers, put in their shoes, try to understand how they see the changes, and then try to communicate as clearly as possible the reasons of those changes.

- *Balance the drive to keep things moving with the need to give people time to catch up.* Since all of us are different, also you followers reactions will be different, If some of them will respond you on the spot, other will may need some time to analyze the situation. You should have to be patient, to communicate or even to coach.

- *Know when to empathize and when to be tough.* Effective leaders know to be tough and assertive in terms of goals, accountability, focus and perseverance. However, they are also empathetic. Listen with an open mind and without judging. Tell people--repeatedly--that you value them, and acknowledge the emotional impact of seeing colleagues and friends escorted out the door.<sup>8</sup>

- *Balance realism and optimism.* You should tell people the truth, acknowledge mistakes and be clear about your situation and prospects for the future. You can be resolute and hopeful without sugarcoating the challenge.<sup>9</sup>

- *Trust yourself, and trust others.* In order to make other trust you, first you will have

to trust yourself, to be sure of the decision you are making. But you should also involve them into your work. You cannot fix the company or implement a new process or come up with a new strategy all on your own. You need the support of peers and subordinates, not only to get the work done but also as fellow travelers on a challenging journey.

- *Know your strengths,* and try new things. In an environment that is changing from a trimester to another, you are confronting different situations every day and you should be prepared for them. So make your own analyze of your qualities and defects, set some goals and try to reach them.

#### IV. Conclusions

In my opinion leaders are 1/3 born, 1/3 educated and 1/3 is left to their choice to cultivate or not their talents. You can't become a great leader by waiting; you have to chase every opportunity to exercise your skills, to read everything that is related to the art of leadership, to take advantage of others experiences, either are good or bad, to get involve in different projects in order to be surrounded by people and the most important to established a model of leadership so that you can compare your achievements and envisioning your objective.

Is hard to become a leader, taking in consideration that you will have to become a very complex person and not a specialist. Peter Drucker used to say "*Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.*"

To conclude I choose another quote from Peter Drucker that can be considered a definition of a leader: "*The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say "I."*"

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/2009/06/24/human-change-management-leadership-managing-ccl.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/2009/06/24/human-change-management-leadership-managing-ccl.html>

*And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say "I." They don't think "I." They think "we"; they think "team." They understand their job to be to make the team function. They*

*accept responsibility and don't sidestep it, but "we" gets the credit. This is what creates trust, what enables you to get the task done."*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>[http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/12008.Peter\\_F\\_Drucker](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/12008.Peter_F_Drucker)

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