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Are leaders made or born — or both?

Most of us remember the outstanding leaders of our high school or college days. They were not only recognized as leaders in our schools, they seemed somehow destined for ultimate success in the adult world. Years later, on returning for class reunions or encountering these same people during a chance meeting, we find that many of these “born leaders” never reached their apparent potential.



POINT OF VIEW

Peter Browning and William Sparks

We may also recall many of our classmates and friends who seemed lost during some of those early years. Although they would have never been picked to reach leadership positions in any field, many, in fact, turn out to be extraordinarily successful leaders. These everyday examples illustrate a heated debate in management and behavioral science — are leaders born or made?

Since Plato first sketched out a model of the “philosopher king” in *The Republic*, researchers, managers and philosophers have pondered the essence of leadership. Questions surrounding the traits, skills and styles of effective leaders are an ongoing source of inspiration for books, videos, seminars and business education. Underlying all of these programs is the assumption that leadership can be taught and more importantly, that it can be learned.

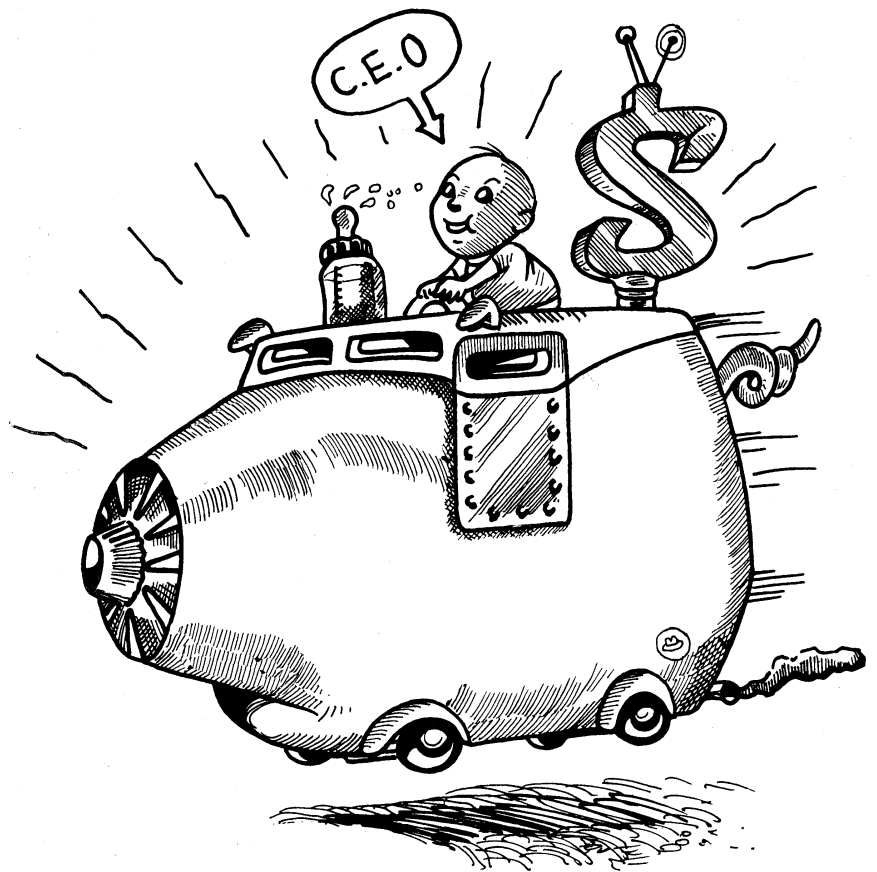


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Such an assumption leads to a critical question: Are leaders made? This is not an insignificant question. If leaders are born, meaning that leadership ability and cognitive capability is set at birth, leadership development may be a fruitless endeavor that could have dire consequences for both the individual and the organization.

The nature argument

The seeds for our modern-day debate can be traced back to the Scottish scholar Thomas Carlyle, who coined the term “great man.” According to Carlyle, some people

are born with more leadership ability than others. These men and women possess great or heroic traits and as such, should rightly hold positions of leadership in social organizations.

Although such a view seems contrary to Western culture and is certainly not politically correct, there is some data to support this notion. Elliott Jaques, a clinical psychologist holding a Ph.D. from Harvard and an M.D. from Johns Hopkins, believes an individual’s cognitive capacity, which is roughly equivalent to IQ, is set at birth. Jaques argues that an individual’s leader-

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ship ability is inherently tied to cognitive capacity. Jaques' theory states that no amount of training, coaching or education can increase this attribute and consequently, leadership development is an oxymoron.

Though controversial, Jaques' theory resonates with academics and practitioners alike. Jerry Harvey, professor of management science at George Washington University and author of *The Abilene Paradox*, agrees with Jaques' contention that human capability and leadership potential are innate and can't be changed. Harvey likens Jaques' theory to a pink elephant sitting in a parlor — most managers see and understand his work on some level, but are unwilling to discuss it.

Dominic Monetta, president of Resource Alternative Inc. and former undersecretary of defense for research and development, agrees with Jaques to a certain extent. While Monetta concurs that intellect is innate and set at birth, he doesn't believe that raw intellect alone can explain effective leadership. Environmental factors may facilitate or inhibit leadership potential.

According to Monetta, activity, the opportunity to apply one's intellect, is essential for effective leaders to develop and reach their potential. The introduction of an environmental factor, such as activity, leads to the other side of the leadership debate coin — nurture.

The nurture argument

The nurture argument surrounding leadership states that leaders

are made through experience, not born. In his seminal Harvard Business Review article, *Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?*, Abraham Zalesnick makes a compelling case for the role that experience plays in developing future leaders. Zalesnick describes two distinct personality types, "once-born" and "twice-born."

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born individual, a sense of self derives from a feeling of professional separateness. Personal development impels them to struggle for psychological and social change, and it is the crucible from which leaders emerge. Twice-born individuals are not preordained for leadership success from birth.

Rather, their success in life is a consequence of the experiences of learning.

Over the last few years, research has led to the development of an intriguing concept — emotional intelligence. Pioneered by Daniel Goleman and others, emotional intelligence states that an individual's ability to recognize and regulate his emotions, and the emotions of others, accounts for 80% of leadership success in organizations today. While IQ may be set at birth, EQ represents a set of personal skills that can be learned and refined throughout one's life.

So, what's the answer? Are leaders made or born? While there is no definitive agreement among the experts, it seems that leadership is a function of both nature and nurture. IQ and aptitude, which are largely innate, may determine the field that one enters, but not necessarily one's success in that field. A growing body of research suggests that effective leadership and personal success are due largely to our experiences, our self-awareness, and our empathy for others. All of these factors can be learned and enhanced, leading us to believe that leaders are largely made, not born.

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