



# IS LEADERSHIP INNATE OR LEARNED? IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to discuss the issue of whether leadership is innate or learned. The paper argues that to be an effective leader, people should have some core traits that are partly innate; however, leadership can be learned in different ways. First, this paper will give the definitions of leadership, and discuss the main core traits leaders should have, including drive, leadership motivation, intelligence, self-confidence, and honesty/integrity. Second, various ways that leadership can be learned, such as on-the-job, self-learning and formal training will be examined. This paper concludes that a significant part of effective leadership can be learned and provides some implications for organizations and business schools/institutions to develop potential leaders.

**Keywords:** leadership, innate, learn, traits, skills

## 1 Introduction

In today's competitive and dynamic business world, the success or failure of an organization is affected by the presence of effective leaders (Elmuti et al., 2005). Leadership in organizations has become an important topic in scientific research over the decades (Hartog et al., 1997). It continues to be one of the most discussed, debated, and studied topics in management (Zornada, 2005). Despite several existing theories, there has historically been debate over whether leadership is innate or whether it can be learned and developed. Although leadership has been suggested to be highly valued, many organizations have not invested time and energy to develop future leaders since they think that leaders can be easily recruited from outside their organization, and that leaders are born, not made (Ruvolo et al., 2004). Regarding this issue, this paper discusses some core traits that leaders should have, such as self-confidence, drive and intelligence. However, people can develop leadership skills and behaviour through on-the-job learning, self-study and formal training. This paper will be divided into three main parts. After a brief definition of leadership is given, the core traits a leader should have, or whether they are innate will be discussed. Finally, how leadership can be learned and developed in organizations and business schools/institutions will be examined.

### 1.1 The concept of leadership

The concept of leadership has been defined in various ways. Definitions of leadership vary in terms of leader behaviour, individual traits, influence on followers, role relationships, influence on task goals and influence on organisational culture (Yukl, 1989). Locke et al. (1991, p.2) define leadership as "the process of inducing others to take action toward a common goal". Martin & Ernst (2005) identify leadership as the collective activities of organizational members to accom-

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plish the task of setting direction, building commitment and creating alignment. Rowe (2001, p.81) defines leadership as “the ability to influence others to voluntarily make day-to-day decisions that enhance the long-term viability of the organization, while at the same time maintaining its short-term financial stability”. In general, leadership has been defined as “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute towards the effectiveness and success of the organisation of which they are members” (Koopman et al. 1999, p.507).

It is important to note that leadership and management are different in terms of providing direction, alignment, motivation and outcomes. According to Lim & Daft (2004), both leaders and managers provide direction for the organization. While management focuses on planning to produce orderly results, leadership sets a direction by creating a vision and strategies to make change. An example of vision is IKEA which sets out “to provide affordable furniture for people with limited budgets.” Management obtains its plan by organizing a structure to carry out the plan and staffing the structure with workers, whereas leadership communicates the vision to the staff who then share it and are committed to achieving it. While management wants to accomplish a plan by controlling and problem solving, leadership obtains the vision by inspiring and motivating followers, satisfying their basic needs, emotions, etc. Finally, management makes a degree of stability, predictability and order in order to help organizations run efficiently, on time and on budget. On the other hand, leadership creates changes, often a radical change (e.g. launching a new product) in order to help organizations adapt to the changing environment. Therefore, although management is necessary for organizations to meet current commitment, leadership is needed to move organizations into the future (Lim & Daft, 2004).

**Table 1.** Comparing leadership and management

	MANAGEMENT	LEADERSHIP
<b>GIVING DIRECTION</b>	Planning, ordering results	Creating vision and strategies
<b>ALIGNMENT</b>	Organizing and staffing	Communicating, sharing vision and values
<b>MOTIVATION</b>	Controlling and problem solving	Inspiring and motivating
<b>OUTCOMES</b>	Stability, predictability and order	Creating changes, often radical changes

*Source: Adapted from Lim & Daft (2004)*

From the definition of leadership, it can be seen that leadership plays a crucial role in the success or failure of organisations. However, in order to lead the organisation, the question as to what characteristics or traits leaders should have and whether these traits are innate will be discussed in the following section.

## 1.2 Core traits leaders should have

The most important characteristic of leadership is the ability to lead (Fifer, 1997). Scholars agree that there are some useful innate attributes or traits that are easily identified with leaders. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, The Great Man leadership theory was highly popular. This theory asserted that leadership qualities are inherited, particularly by leaders from upper class (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Current proponents of this theory point to Lee Iacocca, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Douglas MacArthur as “examples of great men whose innate abilities have been connected somehow with situational forces” (Cawthorn, 1996, p.1). With the development of behavioural sciences, this theory has fallen out. However, the evidence indicates that this theory is still suitable to some extent in certain core traits that significantly contribute to making a person into a good leader (Doh, 2003 & Kirkpatrick et al. 1991). Kotter (1990) pointed out that of the traits of leaders, approximately one-third probably have roots in heredity or are innate. “Trait”, according to Zaccaro et al. (2004, p.103), refers to “stable or consistent patterns of behaviour that are relatively immune to situational contingencies”. The main core traits that leaders should have or be innate include drive, leadership motivation, intelligence, self-confidence, and honesty/integrity (Locke, 1991; Kotter, 1990; Kirkpatrick et al. 1991, Robbins et al., 2014).

### *Drive*

The most obvious trait established mostly by genetics is drive. There are five aspects of drive including achievement motivation, ambition, energy, and initiative (Kirkpatrick et al. 1991). People who provide effective leadership are always likely to have above-average energy levels and often much above average (Kotter, 1990). These people appear to thrive on obtaining something important and being in a position that influences others to obtain. This inner drive often involves high personal standards, a certain dissatisfaction with the current situation and a “tendency to push for continuing improvement” (Kotter, 1990, p.105). Therefore, it is difficult for a person to be a good leader without this trait of leadership.

### *Leadership motivation*

Leaders should not only be full of drive but also have a desire and ability to lead others. Leadership motivation refers to the desire to lead and influence others, and is often equivalent to the need for power (Locke, 1991). People with this trait think a lot about influencing other people, attaining the higher authority and winning an argument (Kirkpatrick et al. 1991). Therefore, a person who has strong leadership motivation prefers to be in leadership role to subordinate role. Otherwise, if a person is motivated to be accepted by others, not in-born with this trait, he (she) will find it difficult to perform as an effective leader.

### *Intelligence (Intellectual ability)*

Some forms of intelligence or intellectual ability that are mostly innate seem to be an important relevant attribute for a good leader. Indeed, leaders must gather, integrate, and interpret a very large amount of information, especially in an era of rapid technological change (Rowley, 1997; Robbins et al. 2014 & Kirkpatrick et al. 1991). These demands require leaders to be intelligent enough to solve complex problems, formulate appropriate strategies and make correct decisions. Intelligence is one of the traits that followers look for in their leaders. If someone is going to be in a leadership position, followers expect that person to be “more capable in some respects

than they are”, and they see intelligence as a “source of authority in the leadership relationship” (Kirkpatrick et al. 1991, p.55).

Some people may think that this attribute can be developed by education, especially in childhood. However, it is no doubt that this trait has some biological roots, i.e. heredity or innateness. It is unusual for a person to have below-average intelligence at age ten and after that above-average at age forty (Kotter, 1990).

#### *Self-confidence*

Self-confidence, a necessary trait for successful leadership has been recognized by many researchers (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, cited in Locke, 1991, p.26). Being in a leadership position, a leader must gather, process and solve a series of problems as well as make decisions. The leader has to convince followers to pursue specific courses of actions. Self-confidence, therefore, plays a crucial role in making decisions and obtaining subordinate’s trust (Daft, 2005; Kirkpatrick et al., 1991). It is obvious that if the leader is not sure what decision to make, or has a high degree of doubt, the followers will be less likely to trust this leader and commit the vision (Locke, 1991 & Kirkpatrick et al. 1991). Therefore, if a person does not have this trait, he (she) is not likely to perform as a strong or effective leader.

#### *Honesty/integrity*

Honesty and integrity are significant traits for leaders. As defined by Locke (1991, p.24), honesty refers to “being truthful or non-deceitful”, and integrity is the “correspondence between word and deed”. Honesty and integrity form the foundation of a trusting relationship between a leader and his (her) subordinates (Daft, 2011; Kirkpatrick et al. 1991). According to Daft (2011, p.50), successful leaders are easy to trust as they have “basic principles and consistently apply them”. Followers are not willing to follow a leader that is not worthy of their trust. Researches found that honesty and integrity are influenced by major events in adulthood; however, the roots of this attribute go back to innateness and early life (Kotter, 1990).

To sum up, the above traits are the basic foundation for a person to have potential to be a good leader. Most of these traits originate partly from innateness or heredity. However, this does not mean that leadership is purely innate; actually, leadership can be gained and developed by learning. This issue will be discussed in the next section.

### **What and how leadership can be learned**

It is no doubt that leadership capacity has its roots partly in genetics (innate); however, leadership can be learned. Among the traits that this paper has mentioned, drive and leadership motivation seem to be difficult to learn, while self-confidence, integrity and intelligence ability (e.g. knowledge of the industry, understanding the economy and the market) could be developed through training and meaningful experience. Additionally, leaders’ personal traits cannot fully explain leadership effectiveness as leadership effectiveness may depend on leadership behaviour, the skills acquired and the situations that leaders confront (Zhihong et al., 2013). In particular, with the continuous changes in the speed of the economy and technology, as well as the speed of change, most researchers suggest that leaders should be “engaged in a constant learning and education process” (Elmuti et al, 2005, p.1019). Leadership can be learned in different ways, such as on-the-job learning, self-learning and formal training.

### *On-the-job learning*

Leadership can be learned on-the-job; for example, potential leaders can learn from the experience of peers who encounter similar leadership challenges. Leadership competence also develops when a person is forced to “address the challenge of innovating, inspiring, and adapting” (Allio, 2005, p.1074). Trial and error are key elements of leadership learning. Many executives report that their greatest learning appeared as the result of a failure rather than a success as failure experiences are more powerful and longer lasting than lessons from successes (Ruvolo et al., 2004; Allio, 2005). In addition, opportunities to work with good leaders will enable people to learn necessary skills to perform in leadership roles (Kotter, 1990).

### *Formal training and Self-learning*

Leadership skills can be learned and developed via formal training and self-learning. For example, the skills of presenting ideas persuasively and communicating more effectively can be enhanced through education (Doh, 2003). As for Doh (2003) & Dubrin (2001), strategic thinking and leadership skills can be learned by case studies, simulation or role play or talking with successful leaders in formal training programs. By these activities, learners may learn much from situation solving, the failures and successes in real-life leadership and can apply in the future. Also, people can learn leadership by reading about how other leaders handle situations and crises, what they do when their organization faces with significant problems or when there is mistrust on the part of the workers. When people consider other readers' successes and failures, they can look at their own situation with a new perspective (Flower & Friedman, 1998). In addition, leaders need knowledge, particularly about what they are leading (Allio, 2005). They must have a context, an understanding of the industry, the economy, the market in which their organization operates, as well as an understanding about their organization, its strengths and weaknesses. Great political leaders, for instance, need to understand the philosophy, structure and issues of the country they lead. This kind of knowledge can be learned from formal training or continuous self-study (Allio, 2005 & Doh, 2003).

### **Conclusion and implications for leadership development**

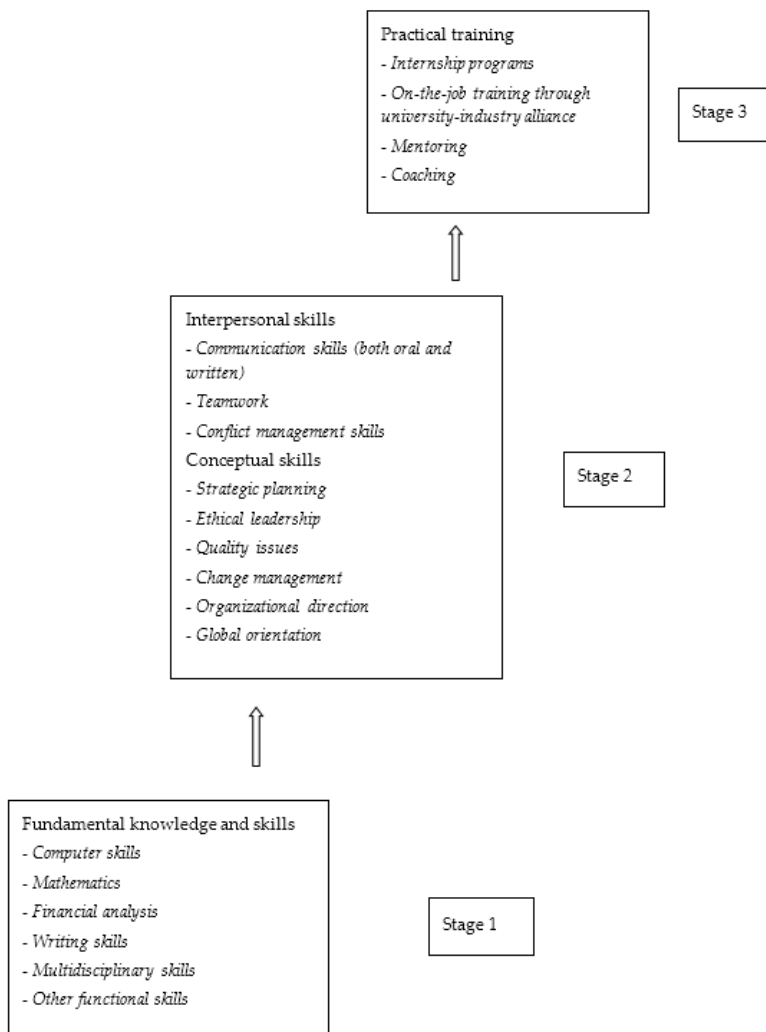
Effective leadership is crucial for the success of any organization. This paper has demonstrated that it is difficult to argue that leadership is innate, not learned or vice versa. Indeed, the origins of leadership are partly from inborn capacity that makes it easy to identify a leader. However, a significant part of leadership can be learned from formal education, self-study and on-the-job learning. In other words, a good leader is a combination of both innateness and long-life learning. Leadership, therefore, has been considered “both an art and a craft” (Flower et al. 1998, p.40). The art is connected to people’s natural abilities, but the craft is what people can learn.

This issue has important implications for organizations in developing leaders. Recruiting people with leadership potential is just the first step, and the next important steps are creating opportunities for these people to develop leadership skills by giving them significant challenges early in their career, motivating them to learn continuously, and providing extensive training in a wide range of leadership skills and perspectives. This is crucial in today’s dynamic and changing environment.

This issue also provides implications for business schools/institutions. As leadership can be learned or taught, leadership education can and should help teach important leadership skills and behaviours. Particular skills that are well taught in order to develop potential leaders

include conceptual, analytical, problem-solving, interpersonal and communication skills (both oral and written) (Zhihong et al., 2013; Doh, 2003). Nevertheless, some aspects of leadership are part of innate traits and cannot be acquired effectively via formal training. For instance, driving, empowering subordinates and demonstrating confidence with humility cannot be effectively obtained through formal classroom training, and thus such aspects could be developed through practical experiences such as case studies, simulation or on-the-job training (e.g. company-sponsored internship programs, university-industry alliance) (Elmuti et al., 2005).

A multi-stage model, adapted from Elmuti et al. (2005) (see Figure 1), can be applied in business institutions to prepare future leaders.



**Fig. 1.** A multi-stage model for leadership education

Source: Adapted from Elmuti et al. (2005)

In stage 1 of the model, learners should be equipped with fundamental knowledge and skills, including mathematics, computer, financial and other hard skills. This stage provides a foundation for further leadership skills development. In the second stage, conceptual and interpersonal skills should be developed for effective leadership education. The major conceptual skills focus on strategic planning, change management, quality issues, and ethical leadership and stress the global orientation of leadership. The training on ethical leadership can also help enhance integrity and honesty among potential leaders. The third and most important stage involves developing practical skills in order to help learners practise what they have learned in the classroom. Such skills can be developed through extensive internship programs from industry practitioners for at least one or more semesters in the training curriculum. Another way is mentoring which can be done via partnership with nearby companies where a mentor from such companies would meet with learners on a regular basis to “explore and advocate practical issues and positions” (Elmuti et al., 2005, p.1028). In summary, business schools/institutions need to design their leadership education curriculum appropriately in order for learners to enhance the traits (e.g. integrity, self-confidence), skills and behaviour needed for effective leadership.

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