



## A Debate Whether Natural-Born Leaders are a Myth or a Fact and its Relation to Managerial Roles

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### Resumo

Existe uma discussão infundável acerca da questão: as pessoas nascem ou tornam-se líderes? Tem sido um desafio tanto para o mercado quanto para pesquisadores descobrirem a verdade. Este é um tema provocante e desafiador que tem despertado o interesse de líderes há muito tempo. Neste artigo, além de revisitarmos algumas teorias essenciais sobre liderança, também discutimos a controvérsia entre as definições de gerenciamento e liderança.

**Palavras-chave:** Liderança; Gestão; Líderes natos; Líderes feitos.

### Abstract

There has been an eternal debate on whether leaders are naturally born or made. It has been a challenge both for business people and researchers to find out the truth. This is a thought-provoking theme that has challenged leaders for a long time. As this paper reviews some essential leadership theories, it also discusses the controversy between management and leadership definitions. Finally, it debates the relationship between natural-born or made leaders' concepts and management and leadership discussion.

**Keywords:** Leadership; Management; Natural Born Leaders; Made leaders.

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"Leadership has long intrigued humankind and has been the topic of extensive literature for centuries" (Northouse, 2015, p. 14). Scholars and marketplace professionals have debated whether a leader is born and genetically inherits traits and characteristics that naturally places him or her in a leadership position or if those qualities are learned. Leadership has many definitions; however, most of them share the same idea, which is the impact on others to facilitate performance (Yulk, 2012). One of the author's controversies concerns the view of leadership as a specialized role or a shared influence process. A person in the position of leadership is not necessarily a leader. The specialized leadership concept involves the role of a

leader, followers, and leaders who perform both functions. The author highlights three characteristics of a leader in a specialized role: attributes, behavior, and the effects on other members. This concept demonstrates to be naive and limited, once a leader's role involves much more than the position one holds before others. These renowned people, the so-called leaders, have distinguishing traits that make them unique among mere mortals. There has been much debate about whether these traits are inherited, learned, or both.

According to Bergamini (1994), leadership has been investigated for such a long time, and there have been many different interpretations. Nonetheless, its differences are not necessarily conflicting ideas; on the





contrary, they are complementary ideas. Leading is part of the human essence. The concern about leadership is as old as history itself. However, most scholars and business people agree that in today's world, there is one thing that matters more than technology and information: people (Piotrkowski, 2014). Solving people's conflicts in organizations, guiding followers to achieve goals, providing them a challenging and, at the same time, a pleasant workplace, it all requires a skilled leader. It requires flexibility from the person in charge. Veldsman, Johnson & Madonsela (2016) affirm that "leaders and leadership have to reinvent themselves if they wish to be successful in the unfolding world of tomorrow (p. 1)". The author states that old leadership practices and concepts may even be harmful and destructive in today's environment.

### **Management and Leadership**

Studs (as cited in Isay, 2016) wrote work is the search "for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying" (p. 3). Unfortunately, for some people out there, work is dying slowly and painfully. Work cannot be simply an exchange of time for money. It must have some meaning.

According to Robbins and Judge (2013), leadership is "the ability to influence a group towards the achievement of a vision or set of goals" (p. 368). Competent leaders can guide their followers and answer their questions. They promote trust, faith in their decisions. People will not follow and seek guidance from someone who is perceived as dishonest or who lacks integrity. Nevertheless, not everyone in a management position is a leader, and not every leader is a manager. Someone may be in a leadership position only by its place in the company, but that does not mean that person is a leader.

Managers and anyone in a high hierarchical position in a company appreciate

processes, control, stability, and problem solvers (Zaleznik, 2004). The author also states that leaders, as opposed to managers, can handle chaos and structural problems more effectively, trying to have a better understanding of the whole process. Management and leadership can be distinct and separate roles, but they can also overlap. As Yukl (2012) mentions, there can be managers that are not leaders and leaders that are not managers. The roles overlap when managers, directors, and CEOs are also considered leaders among their peers, followers, and even their superiors.

Leadership and management are two different, yet related systems of action, and both are necessary for an organization's well-being...management is about coping with complexity – it is responsive. Leadership is about coping with change – it too is responsive, but mostly proactive" (Banks & Ledbetter, 2014, p. 17). That is why there is a difference between a boss and a leader. A boss (who is not a leader before the followers), is concerned about profit. This person never motivates or encourages their subordinates. Failure is always the employees' responsibility, but when success is achieved, all the glory goes to the manager. A leader knows the group and thinks about power as a shared responsibility. A Chinese proverb says, "if one finger is sore, the whole hand will hurt," and that is sort of what a leader feels about its team.

Wallace (2016) explains that "the leader's ability to influence others is integral to an organization's effective management. The leadership role is a delicate combination of the processes, the techniques, and personal traits of the leader" (p. 56). Also, Johnson (2015) describes, "moral leaders lay the foundation for collective trust by acting in a trustworthy manner. They demonstrate character traits... They also communicate a clear sense of mission and vision, foster an atmosphere that encourages openness and sharing" (p. 337). True leaders share some common traits. Inspiring, energetic, charismatic, proactive,





fair, honest, visionary, ethical, self-confident, intelligent, passionate, and transparent are qualities often related to leaders. The proposal here is to discuss whether those traits are intrinsically part of the leader's personality or if they are the result of good leadership.

### **Leadership Theories**

For many decades, from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, there was a predominant feeling leadership was a trait people were born with. Their thoughts were that you were put in this world with the capacity to lead or not. It was not something learnable. First researches about the topic tried to identify some traits (like physical characteristics, intellectual capacity, and personality) that would differ leaders from non-leaders.

### **The Traits Theory**

Which individual attributes one must have to lead effectively? The positive side is that once one identifies those traits, sticks to them, and become good leaders; people will follow them. The negative aspect is that there are several traits to be considered. Furthermore, there is no agreement on which of those traits better fit in all scenarios.

Ralph M. Stogdill, a former Professor of Management Science and Psychology at Ohio University, is the author of the article "Personal Factors Associated with Leadership: A Survey of the Literature", where the traits theory was deeply discussed. The theory emphasizes that ambition, energy, the desire to lead, honesty, integrity, self-confidence, intelligence, and job-relevant knowledge are essential traits that differentiate leaders from non-leaders. Nevertheless, the capability of predicting leadership through those traits is ineffective (Robbins, 2006; Yukl, 2012).

### **Behavioral Theories**

Thoughts about the lack of credibility of the traits theory led researchers to go in another direction. They started analyzing some

leaders' behavior and tried to find a specific type of standard behavior.

Leadership studies identified behavioral characteristics of leaders related to effective performance at work. There were two dimensions of the leader's behavior: people-oriented and task-oriented leaders. According to Northouse (2004), they were trying "to determine how leaders could best combine their task and relationship behaviors to maximize the impact of these behaviors on the satisfaction and performance of followers" (p. 74).

One of the most critical behavioral theories of leadership is the Managerial Grid developed by Blake and Mouton in the early 1960s. It is a framework to understand a leader's management style and make it more effective. If the behavioral approaches are correct, in other words, if we could identify the critical determinants of leadership behavior, then we would be able to train people to be leaders.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Leverett (2016) defines that "transformational leadership is the ability to motivate, encourage, and stimulate through inspiration. This style of leadership practice influences followers to achieve goals and increase confidence, commitment, and job performance" (p. 25). This kind of leader is inspiring. A transformational leader can make their followers question their vision of the world. This leader allows them to think.

Companies with transformational leaders in charge usually experience more employee satisfaction, lower turnover, and higher productivity. As Leverett (2016) mentioned, "transformational leadership works to improve the performance of followers and develop them to the fullest potential. Those who exhibit transformational leadership traits often have a strong set of internal values and ideals" (p.48). The fact is whether those leaders are born with the qualities that make a transactional leader successful. Many scholars





believe that individuals can be trained to exhibit such behaviors. Robbins and Judge (2007) propose a three-step process to justify that even if an individual inherits certain tendencies that will help its leadership, this person is still able to learn:

First, develop an aura of charisma by maintaining an optimistic view; using passion as a catalyst for generating enthusiasm; and communicating with the whole body, not just with words. Second, draw others in by creating a bond that inspires them to follow. Third, bring out the potential in followers by tapping into their emotions. (p. 380)

We must observe that there are techniques and specific tools that allow individuals to improve their leadership skills. As mentioned in Bass and Riggio (2006), "Harry Truman succeeded to the presidency on Roosevelt's death, "without experience, without knowledge, without prestige" according to The New York Times. He had been a transactional politician but assuming the presidency, he became highly transformational" (p. 82). Truman was a very active president, whether people agree with his decisions or not. However, even though he was underestimated, he proved himself to be an influential leader.

### The Charismatic Leader

Charismatic leaders possess the outstanding rhetorical ability (Germain, 2012). They differ from other leaders "through their ability to formulate and articulate an inspirational vision and by exhibiting actions that create an impression that they and their mission are extraordinary" (Lepine, Yiwen, Crawford & Rich, 2016). Leaders who are perceived as charismatic are seen as more efficient, receive higher productivity ratings, and have more satisfied and motivated followers (Conger & Kanungo, 2003).

Max Weber brought the vision of a charismatic, God-gifted leader to the secular

world, followed by those in affliction. Conger and Kanungo (2003) mention that "charismatic leaders transform the nature of work by making it appear more heroic, morally correct and meaningful" (p. 17). Weber studied charisma as a trait whose approach looks at qualities such as being visionary, energetic, unconventional, and exemplary (Germain, 2012). Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) also emphasize that charismatic leaders always share a vision with their followers. A vision is a general idea that represents shared values and "generally directs attention toward desired outcomes and away from undesired or irrelevant aspects of the performance" (p. 37).

Followers of charismatic leaders is a very poorly explored topic. According to Conger and Kanungo (2003), very few studies in this area attempt to resolve a conflict between who they are and what they wish to become. They usually seek the charismatic leader for what they lack: self-assurance and confidence.

### Implications and Applications

As demonstrated in the literature review, there are many kinds of leadership, and all of them complement the other. There is not a better concept or a definition that suits all situations best. Each scenario demands a different approach, a different kind of leader.

Although every person has the capacity to learn, this capacity develops according to the person's potential. This potential is an inherited trait. According to Grabovac (2005): It is essential to understand that some leadership aspects cannot be learned (Resnick, 2003). The first sign of this is related to DNA...not all people have the capacity to discover electricity or paint like Michelangelo...many things can be learned through education and experience, there are limits to one's potential that must be recognized. This holds true for leadership skills, as well. (p. 161)

Inherited traits are an important part to be considered when it comes to leadership. An





intrinsic part of who we are belongs to our genetics. However, Grabovac also explains that "when we see that leadership is translated into creating vision, building alignment and effecting deployment, it is obvious that leadership is tangible and can be learned" (p. 161). Leaders are made through focused effort and developmental processes that will enable them to grow in their confidence and in their skills to become more effective in their leadership abilities. Every person can influence and impact another person. Nevertheless, some people can influence hundreds, thousands of other people. Individuals became leaders based on the skills and abilities they develop and the strength and core values that come from their potential.

Many scholars agree that being a good manager does not mean being a good leader (Yulk, 2012; Cadwell, 2004; Robbins, 2013). A competent manager may possess the skills necessary for that job. Good managers bring good results, increase numbers, and works for the benefit of the company. Leaders inspire. They seek good results and are concerned about the best way for the team to achieve good results. A great leader benefits the company as well by motivating and engaging the team. Management skills are the foundation for other sets of skills that complement a leader's profile (Cadwell, 2004).

### Conclusion

By reviewing the theories, an evolution of the concepts and definitions is seen. Leaders build themselves and learn with the relations they establish with others. Those relations start in the early years of their lives when we get in touch with different kinds of hierarchy in social groups, whether in our family or institutions like our schools, churches, or organizations. As we get more involved with those groups, we get to know those who lead and those who are led. The ingredients of leadership are sophisticated, and most researches show that they depend on the context, the tasks, the level of authority, and

the subordinates' maturity and capability. Leadership abilities take time to be learned. It relies on specific behaviors and traits and how they will be used in certain contexts.

To conclude, we can infer from this analysis that a so-called natural-born leader must have a potential that can be developed. During the journey of a leader, much will be learned from experience. Different tasks will demand different approaches. Someone in the position of leadership must be wise to establish a good relationship with the people around. It does not mean that a leader must be lenient, but on the contrary, the leader must be firm to achieve the goals and guide the team to do the same. After all, just like Ralph Nader, environmental, political activist, lecturer, and attorney said once, "the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers" (Daskal, 2015)

A relationship can be established between the natural-born leader's theories and the concepts of management and leadership. Although many people in a management position may have job requirements, not all of them have the necessary skills to be leaders. Leaders (with inherited traits or learned abilities) can manage, but not all managers, especially those without the aptitude to lead, can be good leaders. Glinkowska & Kaczmarek (2017) list several features and abilities required for the leader of today and tomorrow: the ability of systemic thinking, act in a multicultural environment, readiness for lifelong learning, and "personality traits and high standards of behavior."

To answer if the natural-born leader is a myth or fact, I would say that it is a fact. Although we must consider the existence of natural bright people born to lead, it is imperative to understand that this ability must be developed and practiced. True leaders must have a special gift but also have the determination to learn and develop their skills. Now and then, new theories will arise with evidence that leadership is intrinsic. Other theories, proving leadership is learned.





However, what is known for sure is that whether it is one or the other (as we could notice, scholars and researchers have not yet agreed on an answer), a leader must be fair, honest, unprejudiced, and open to learning every day.

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