

leadership instalments

Leadership: Not For Everyone?

By Dan Gaynor

WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT LIKES TO BELIEVE

ANYONE CAN BECOME a leader - just read the right book or take the right course. This is a dangerous myth that puts many well meaning people in positions where they fail and the people they lead suffer for it.

Years of practical experience watching hundreds of people succeed and fail affirms the truth that leadership is just not for everyone. More fail than succeed. Great leaders are uncommon. Many of those who have tried looked like they should have succeeded; their success as a doer led to their promotions. If doing something well is the prerequisite to leading something well, they should have succeeded. The reality is, the most effective leaders were often not the best doers - they were good but often not the best.

All leaders are born with specific talents and then refine their skills through experience. Leadership characteristics and talents are part of the basic wiring. While experience is essential, one cannot teach leadership to a person lacking the raw material and expect success. This assertion always draws the criticism that I am raising leaders to preferential status. I am not. Our culture does encourage us to believe that leaders are better than followers, but this too is folly. Every good organization needs effective leaders and followers. Both are honorable roles. Leadership is exclusive, but so is carpentry, art and mathematics.

We are all born with different gifts and all are equally valuable - one corporate body, many members contributing in different ways. A corporate body composed entirely of leaders simply would not work. I admire the ability of skilled carpenters to draw beauty from wood but try as I may I do not have the talent for carpentry. I measure twice and cut wrong every time - the simple ski rack I tried to build last year is evidence of this. Trying make a carpenter of me would be a disaster. I would struggle on in a role I could not succeed at and my failure would disadvantage the corporate body.

Leadership is a different and complementary role, not a preferential one. Leadership does not elevate one person over another and it does not make a leader a better person; it just distinguishes a leader from someone with different talents serving in a different role. The best leaders do not see themselves as elite. We need carpenters, mathematicians and leaders.

All truly effective leaders have always been leaders, just as the best carpenters have always been good at building things. Young leaders are the people who have influence in the school yard or

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locker room as children. As they mature, they almost always feel a call to lead. They watch the workplace they are part of and are convinced they can improve it, for everyone. Leaders are drawn to leadership just as carpenters are drawn to wood.

Too many people accept leadership for the wrong reasons – for money, prestige or simply because it was expected of them. Without the right raw material they will fail. All effective leaders have specific characteristics and talents that endow effective leadership: empathy, humility and courage must make the list. If we treated these as key qualifications and looked more closely for them we would save many well-meaning people from career setbacks and many followers from toxic, discouraging or just ineffective leaders. You may have these gifts. If you believe you do, develop them to the fullest. If you are a more senior leader you must learn to find and develop them in others.

Discussion questions:

Which qualities do you believe are essential to leadership success?
What are you focusing on in your character development?
Which characteristics were most lacking in the leaders you have seen fail?

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