



## ARE LEADERS BORN OR MADE?

Or is the question even relevant?

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Are leadership qualities innate or acquired?

The above is a question that has obsessed many leadership scholars over the years and is often posed by executives in development programs. Here's our response – it's a bad question, which begets bad answers.

As many decades of leadership writing shows, this is a question that cannot yield a satisfactory response, especially for aspiring leaders.

Understandably, the line taken by management educators tends to be that most leadership qualities can be developed, given adequate amounts of key personal characteristics, notably intelligence and physical energy. But the fact is that you do not know what you are born with until you try very hard to express it.

So why do executives even concern themselves with this question? Often, it is to gauge their own leadership potential; sometimes, to determine that of others.

Yet “born or made?” is a bad a question for such assessments because it gets executives focused on the wrong topics – such as which dispositions are fixed and which behaviors are amenable to change.

Actually, the question illuminates little, as it fails to deal with a basic point, namely the *degree of responsibility sought*.

What level of leadership responsibility does the person aspire to? The highest levels of leadership responsibilities present tasks that are massive, complex and conflictual. The playing field, the boundaries and the rules become less certain. Indeed, it is the leader's job to shape these choices.

Also, the further executives advance in leadership, the more they must deal with high-caliber people who know how to get what they want, who are difficult, strong-willed and who have a sharp appetite for power.

For executives trying to assess their leadership potential, we propose instead three critical questions.

*Question 1: How far do you want to go?*

To reach higher office and to fulfill the obligations of higher office, you must continuously make choices that will affect other people's money and lives. And you will be doing this in a context where other people will want your position or will be competing with you for the next higher role.

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It is easy to criticize the competence of those with greater responsibilities than ourselves, and even easier to fantasize about how we would do it better.

Many people who aspire to senior leadership simply underestimate the degree and kinds of effort required to take on those responsibilities.

A useful exercise: Look at your immediate boss' job and honestly ask if you could do it as well, or better. Then, stretch even further and take the most senior leader in your line of sight – perhaps the CEO – and educate yourself about what that person must deal with.

Get a feel for the gap between how you spend your time and the time, energy and capabilities required to do those jobs. What *would* it take to be CEO of your company? What would you have to do that you now cannot do, or do not enjoy doing? What do you enjoy now, but would have to give up?

We see too many executives who set themselves up to fail by lack of valid assessment of the role they are pursuing in comparison to their true capabilities.

*Question 2: What are you willing to invest?*

Aspiring leaders can delude themselves about their strengths and the extent of their limitations.

The realization that you have significant limitations can be hard to digest. But if you are serious about wanting to lead, you face tough choices about how much effort you must put in and in which areas – in order to grow the capabilities that enable the exercise of extreme responsibility.

The work of leadership certainly requires business smarts, technical capabilities and cultural sensibilities, but above all, it is about power. While this point is upsetting to some people, the brutal reality is that whatever else a leader must do, a leader must gain, exercise and retain power. We meet too many “high potentials” who aspire to high leadership, but are used to rewards for being bright and creative. This breeds a sense of entitlement that is incompatible with the necessity to *fight* for leadership power.

While it has bad connotations for some people, the appetite for power is a necessary condition for reaching positions of high responsibility.

Also, there will be pleasures that you must give up. Certainly, there will be implications for aspects of your personal life – raising questions not so much of “work-life balance” in the short-term but rather of finding a “workable mix” over the long-term.

And there are constraining beliefs to overcome that limit your capacity to see things as they actually are, and to generate new behaviors. As a leader you must take people where they have never been before – in thought and action – often against their initial preferences. But

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until you let go of the hooks that tie you to your own past, you won't be able to go new places either.

*Question 3: How will you keep it up?*

Over several decades, you need methods to keep yourself going when you are not being recognized and rewarded for your performances – and to deal with criticism, resistance, setbacks and people disliking you or what you are asking them to do.

The assessment of the costs of leadership is not a one-off event.

If you envisage another 10, 20 or even 30 years of leadership work, then you must find effective methods for maintaining your physical vitality, your emotional flexibility and your intellectual reach and freshness.

As they do the hard work of leadership, many people become more closed and set in the ways that have brought them success so far. So periodically, senior executives must create time-out to review where they are investing their time and energy, to ensure that they remain capable of generating new behaviors to deal with new challenges.

Management educators might be right that leadership is learnable. But instead of taking comfort in the idea that you can develop, you should take fright at how much work there is devising methods for managing novel situations, indeed extreme circumstances.

The most significant leadership question is not “born or made?”. The important questions are: what are your current assets and what are you willing to do – or to sacrifice – to attain leadership at the highest level you can?

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