

How to become a great leader

I've heard plenty of people say that "leaders are born, not made." I don't believe it for a minute.

Sure, there is a mix of genetic factors that many people identify with leaders -- mostly good looks, a great hairline, good teeth, and a winning smile. Those are about the main things that could be realistically part of a genetic predisposition -- and unfortunately, are the elements many people look at when they say "he is a great leader."

Beyond that, great leaders are made. Some great leaders are made while the person is still in grade school -- and others are made when the person is 50 years old (or 60 or 70, or 30, or 18).

Great leaders are made through a combination of training, indoctrination, trust, and skill sets -- and while not every prospective leader can get every element, we all can become great leaders by developing what we can -- and then learning the other things as they come around.

What kind of skill sets does a leader need to have? This is certainly not an exhaustive list -- and I don't know it's possible to create an exhaustive list -- but here are some of the elements that made a person a great leader.

1. Trust -- both being trusted by others, and learning to trust those who would follow. I put this as the first element in this list, because it is, in many ways, the most important. Potential leaders become great leaders, in part because they were given room to grow, and trusted by a mentor of some kind. Kids who are identified as "born leaders" gain this trust at an early age -- their parents and friends show trust in them. Parents provide a loving environment for trust to develop, giving challenges to their children, and expecting them to meet those challenges. Friends provide an environment where would-be leaders can stretch their wings a bit.

Later on, trust is something that people need to develop, sometimes in a more formal mentoring environment -- but the elements are similar. Great mentors allow a potential leader to learn and grow, in a supporting environment, challenging them to greater heights, and helping them where rough spots may

develop. Co-workers and self-governing teams provide a chance for budding leaders to try their hand at leadership -- and provide an easy path to gain the trust of co-workers.

But when you get right down to it, no matter if you're a kid or a co-worker, trust is a matter of earning the right to be trusted. In corporations, people trust someone to is true to his or her word -- and who follows through with great results. They trust people who trust them.

If we were building a building, and labelled it "leadership," trust would be at its foundation. And it's something that can be developed and earned.

2. Ability. Is ability born? Perhaps in athletic competitions, some natural ability would be conferred by a genetic makeup -- but even then, it doesn't guarantee leadership qualities. Ability is learned, not born. What's more, given time and effort, you can learn how to do anything -- anything at all. As human beings, we are not trapped in our environments -- we can redefine those environments to suit us. Sure, since some things are genetic, you may never be able to learn how to play basketball as well as an NBA star -- but you can learn how to lead a company -- or a family.

Did you know that many of the world's great business leaders are people who rose up through the ranks of the company? They are also often some of the most effective leaders -- because they don't come into a circumstance with just an MBA and experience gained in a totally unrelated field.

Great leaders? Was Patton great before he was trained? Was Churchill great, merely because he was the son of a great man? Was Lincoln great just because he split logs as a child, or was he great because he taught himself law and serving others? Do you have to have an MBA to be a great leader? Experience would suggest not -- there are MBAs who are great leaders, and there are MBAs who couldn't lead their way out of a paper bag.

Can you gain training? Yes -- now more than ever! Can you put that training to work? Hey, if your company doesn't recognize your great ability, start your own company!

Ability is not born -- it's learned.

3. Dealing with people. Can you learn how to deal with people? Even if you're shy? Certainly, you can. Dale Carnegie made a mint by teaching people how to do so -- and his company still exists today. The fact is that even if you're a bit on the shy side, you can learn how to deal with others. The techniques and methods they use -- even if they picked them up when they were children -- are techniques you can learn and use, as well. What's more, they are simple -- read Carnegie's book if you don't believe me -- and include such items as smiling,

laughing, and expressing a sincere interest in other people.

Can you learn how to do that? Hey -- you may just turn your life around. Being sociable may not be the easiest thing in the world for you to do -- but you can do it -- and you can learn how to do it, and do it well.

4. Developing and providing vision. Can you learn how to develop a vision, and rally others to see that vision? Certainly. Here's the big shocker where "vision" is concerned: nobody has a crystal ball -- some people just have read more, and experienced more than you.

Let me give you an example: I watch the TV show "The Deadliest Catch." Heaven knows why I watch it -- it's mostly the same crab, wind, rain, and ice every season, with the occasional argument on deck or the unfortunate occasional mayday -- but I watch the thing.

A couple of episodes ago, the boat's captain took a look at the weather out the window, and predicted a storm moving in. The storm came. Did he have a crystal ball? No -- he had many years' worth of experience, and a radio tuned to weather forecasts. He could go out on deck, and proclaim that "it looks like we're looking at a storm," and the deckhands would believe him.

Business trends can be predicted -- even in an environment like this one, which started going south in 2007. It takes a little bit of reading, and some acclimatization to the terms used -- but it's something anyone can learn to do in their particular markets. Learn how to read the winds of change in business, like the fishing boat skipper could read the weather, and all of a sudden, you pick up credibility and vision.

The second part of "the vision thing" is to use those experiences and information to formulate new destinations.

Let's get back to the fishing show. In the show, the boats' skippers choose where to put down their pots, in order to catch crab. They may be working on analysis given to them by marine analysts, or they may be putting a wet finger to the wind -- but something gained through experience and information makes them choose one place over another -- at least to start. Here's the catch -- they may not even understand why they put the pots down where they do -- but their brains have made a decision, and in many cases, that apparent seat-of-the-pants decision pays off for them.

Why does this work? Let me refer you to the excellent book [Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking](#) where the author spends time telling you that so-called "gut" feelings are ones that our brain makes instantaneously -- as the result of training, biases, and experience.

"The Vision Thing" looks like magic -- because it's a gut feeling on the part of the leader, even after looking at all the facts. But it's mostly the product of experience and learning -- and those are two things you can gain. With them, comes vision.

5. Motivation ability. Do you have the ability to motivate others? I know a person who is a great salesman -- but a terrible motivator. He hasn't given the time and effort to learn motivation -- and doesn't seem to want to try. Can you learn how to motivate others? Certainly you can -- and every great leader learns this. Patton said he motivated his troops by straight talking, hard driving, and filthy language. It was the type of motivation that led veterans who served in Patton's ranks to say, in response to the question, "What did you do in the war, Daddy," to answer "I was with Patton," not "I was in the Third Army."

Motivation of yourself and others can be learned -- and you can learn it.

6. Follow through. I used to have a boss who seemed to be ADHD -- but he was able to follow through on everything. His secret? He kept a list -- and was constantly writing things down and checking them off when they were completed. It worked for him -- and he was all over the map. It can work for you -- at least until you get used to mentally following through on everything.

7. Presentation. All right -- some people get a better genetic break than others -- but that doesn't mean you can't buy better suits, or dress better, or take better care of yourself. What's more, you can practice public speaking (try Toastmasters -- the public speaking club, not the waffle maker) or take assignments speaking at church or at civic organizations. Most of us have something we could offer a talk on -- our interests or our views on the world -- and those activities make us more visible, and more viewed.

8. Self-promotion. Hey, nobody's going to keep your best interest to heart more than you will. I'm saying that occasionally you have to toot your own horn a bit -- but that doesn't mean you should hire the USC marching band to do it for you. Don't become arrogant, but don't become invisible, either. Can you learn this? Sure can -- there are many books that will tell you how to do it, if you're so inclined -- or you can hire a career coach to help you out.

9. Involvement. Can you develop this? Certainly. Join teams, volunteer for committees. Share your understanding of events (make certain you know what you're talking about first).

10. Organization. I probably shouldn't put this last -- it's important -- but I'm putting it here because too many people get hung up on this step. They spend all their time organizing to make the leap -- but they never leap. Try a simple method -- make a list of what tasks you need to accomplish. Work the list. Check off tasks after you've accomplished them. For the start at least, that's all the organization you need.

Can you be a leader? Good grief, you can become a **great** leader. You can become such a great leader, that people will look at you, and say "Now, there goes a born leader."

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