

Born or made?

The notion that leadership is a mystical trick practised by the select few is one of the biggest management myths of all time – don't fall for it

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here is quite a flattering, self-validating story that some bosses like to tell about themselves. It goes something like this:

“Look at me; I got to the top.”

“I clearly deserve to be here.”

“That’s the thing about leaders – you can’t keep a good one down. They are born, not made.”

It is perhaps a comforting story to those at the top, and you can see why some bosses tell it. There is one main problem with it, however. It’s rubbish.

In fact, it’s not merely rubbish, it is also damaging. You can see how this ‘born, not made’ attitude can hold back the potential of people and ossify a certain tired and inflexible culture in the business. The ‘born, not made’ theory of leadership is the enemy of diversity.

If bosses believe they were born, not made, they are not going to seek out capable people who look or sound different to them. They will hire and promote ‘mini-mes’ instead. They will not recognise the need for cultures to grow, develop and

change. Rather, they will believe that there is only one style or approach to leadership that works – theirs. In so doing, they will be setting their business or organisation up for failure.

Leadership is not some obscure or mystical trick that is only within the reach of a select few. Leadership is a way of behaving in different contexts – describing a series of tasks that are necessary, setting ambitious goals, making clear what is expected of people, and telling an inspiring story about a future that is (just) within reach.

Crucially, most people are capable of displaying at least some of these leadership skills at the right time, at different moments. And we can all get better at them. While corporate hierarchy may still have a bit more life in it than some people imagine, there are times when we need to ignore job titles and ‘seniority’, and let anyone who can take a lead.

Leadership is ‘plain you’

Someone who skilfully demystified the role of leadership, through his words and actions, was British field marshal William Slim, leader of the 14th Army in the successful Burma campaign during World War II.

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Leadership, Slim said, was “plain you”. Speaking at West Point (the US equivalent of the UK’s Royal Military Academy Sandhurst), in 1950, Slim said: “If I were asked to define leadership, I should say it is the projection of personality. It is the most intensely personal thing in the world because it is just plain you.”

It follows that leaders and aspiring leaders need to do some work on themselves, find out who they are, and develop the attributes they need to lead more effectively. Or, as Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones put it in their book *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?: “Be yourself, more, with skill.”*

No trickery or fake charisma is needed to step up and lead, Field Marshal Slim suggested. It is essentially a question of drawing on the qualities you have and revealing them to those you are trying to lead. There is no ‘one right way’. There are as many ways to lead as there are leaders and situations. But few are born to it. We have to learn.

There must have been something to Slim’s approach. He led a multinational force, brought together in crisis to face the formidable Japanese army in treacherous conditions, and he succeeded. General the Lord Dannatt, former chief of the general staff, has said of Slim: “He had a personal

style that was both understated and endearing. His quiet authority won the hearts of his soldiers. Slim may not have had the manpower and equipment that he would have liked, but he had the leadership, the intellect and the mature understanding of operational art to win in Burma and to inspire subsequent generations.”

The British army has thought long and hard about the question of leadership, so it has much to teach us. Soldiers are trained to recognise that while there may be an officer in charge at the start of a battle or operation, that officer could get killed at any moment. Someone else will have to step up to replace them – and that person could be you, plain you.

This battlefield lesson could be translated into the more peaceful environment of the workplace. Why should the ‘boss’ have all the bright ideas? Anyone should be able to speak up. Anyone could come up with a new way of working or customer insight that could make all the difference to the business.

Power to the people

It follows that leadership training should be made available to staff at all levels, not just a lucky few at the top. Chronic productivity problems stem, in part, from a lack of genuine empowerment and skills development throughout the workforce, including the neglect of so-called leadership skills (which are, in fact, just normal people management skills). This reflects the classic British mistake that has been made in secondary education for decades: worrying too much about those who are already doing well, and not worrying enough about those who have enjoyed fewer advantages and risk falling behind.

Some leaders love to spread and perpetuate myths about their special abilities. They worry more about their own PR than the success of the business they are supposed to be leading. They tell you that leaders are “born, not made”, and that others should know their place. They draw on this mythology when trying to justify their huge salaries.

But leaders are not members of some obscure magical tribe. They are just people, plain you. Anyone can lead, provided they are given support and stretching tasks from which they can learn. Leaders are made, not born. ■

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