

CHAPTER 1

LEADERS ARE BORN AND SO ARE YOU

We've been writing and speaking about exemplary leadership for more than 30 years, and throughout that time there's one question people ask us more often than any other. That most frequently asked question is some variation of "Are leaders born or made?" Maybe you're wondering the same thing.

Our answer to that question has always been the same: We have never met a leader who was not born. We've also never met an accountant, artist, athlete, engineer, lawyer, physician, scientist, teacher, writer, or zoologist who was not born.

You might be thinking, "Well that's not fair. That's a trick question. Everyone is born." That's precisely our point. Every one of us is born, and every one of us has the necessary material to become a leader—including you. The question you should be asking yourself is not "Will I make a difference?" In becoming a better leader, the more demanding and significant question you should be asking is "How will I make the difference I want?"

And just for the record, no one has ever asked us, "Are managers born or made?"

Let's get something straight right from the start. Leadership is not some mystical quality that only a few people have and everyone else doesn't. Leadership is not preordained. Neither is it the private reserve of a special class of charismatic men and women. Leadership is not a gene. It is not a trait. There is just no hard evidence to suggest that leadership is imprinted in the DNA of some people and not others.

We've collected assessment data from millions of people around the world. We can tell you without a doubt that there are leaders in every profession, every type of organization, every religion, and every country, from young to old, male and female. It's a myth that leadership can't be learned—that you either have it, or you don't. There is leadership potential everywhere we look.

Asking, "Are leaders born or made?" is not a very productive question. It's the old nature versus nurture argument, and it doesn't get at a more important question that must be asked and answered. The more useful question is "Can you, and those you work with, become better leaders than you are today?" The answer to that question is a resounding yes.

There are people who maintain that not everyone has the potential to lead and not everyone has the capacity to learn to lead. That's because myths, misconceptions, and false assumptions about leadership create barriers to developing leaders at all levels. One of the first challenges on the path to exemplary leadership is to overcome these folk legends and false assumptions. They foster a model of leadership that is antithetical to the way real-life leaders operate. They also create unnecessary barriers to the revitalization of our organizations and communities.

Before we can examine evidence and examples of the mindsets that enable people just like you to become the best leaders they can be, we need to address some of the fables that keep people from thinking that they can provide leadership and be

leaders. Five myths inhibit learning to lead and contribute most to the misunderstandings about what leadership is and isn't.

THE TALENT MYTH

The talent myth has captivated the training and development world for years, and some have come to accept it as the new gospel. If only you search far and wide, and long and hard, you'll be able to identify the best and the brightest people and then place them in all the existing leadership roles. Problem solved. No training required; just find the right person. Well, good luck with that.

Talent is overrated.¹ Florida State University professor and noted authority on expertise K. Anders Ericsson and his colleagues have found, over the 30 years of their research, that raw talent is not all there is to becoming a top performer. It doesn't matter whether it's in sports, music, medicine, computer programming, mathematics, or other fields; talent is not the key that unlocks excellence.² In studying what it takes to succeed and how people reach their goals, Professor Heidi Grant Halvorson at Columbia Business School reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that the emphasis on talent, smarts, and innate ability has done more harm than good.³ As she points out, there's a vast difference between "being good" and "getting better."

Leadership is not a talent that you have or you don't. In fact, it is not *a talent* but an observable, learnable set of skills and abilities. Leadership is distributed in the population like any other set of skills.

For more than three decades we have been fortunate to study the stories of thousands of ordinary people who have led others to make extraordinary things happen.⁴ There are millions more stories and examples. The belief that leadership is available only to a talented few is a far more powerful deterrent

to development than anything else is. It prevents too many people from even trying, let alone excelling.

To become a better leader than you are right now, the first fundamental thing you have to do is to *believe you can* be a better leader and that you can learn to improve your leadership skills and abilities. Without that belief, there's no training or coaching that's going to do much good.

THE POSITION MYTH

This myth associates leadership with a hierarchical position. It assumes that when you have a position at the top, you're automatically a leader. It assumes that leadership is a title and that if you don't have a title of authority, you aren't a leader. It assumes that leadership starts with a capital *L*.

Every day, the mass media and social media perpetuate this myth. People write and talk about how the recent turnaround of an organization was because of what *the* chief executive officer (CEO) did or that *the* founder of a new start-up was responsible for a multibillion-dollar valuation. It's as if people at the top, or those with the highest rank and the most privilege, are the only ones who ever do anything extraordinary. Nonsense.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Leadership is not a rank, a title, or a place. Look it up in the dictionary. You'll find that leadership starts with a lowercase *l*.⁵ And the word *lead* literally comes from an Old English word meaning "to go" or "to guide." That's what leadership is about: going places and guiding others. You could be a CEO, but it's much more likely that you are a parent, coach, teacher, frontline worker, middle manager, volunteer, community activist, or concerned citizen. Every student of history knows that world-changing movements have been initiated and led by people without title, rank, or tenure.

It's also true that those who made it to the top didn't start there. More than likely, they got there because they learned leadership skills along the way. Again, you don't have to be at the top to lead; you can lead from any direction. Leadership is much more about what you do than it is about where you are sitting.

Leading is about the actions you take, not the position you hold. It's about the values that guide your decisions and actions. It's about the visions you have for yourself and others. To become an exemplary leader, the second fundamental is that you have to *aspire to excel*. You have to aim for something greater, dream of something better, and strive for something nobler than what exists right now. You have principles that guide you and that transform and lift people up to become their best selves.

THE STRENGTHS MYTH

From the ancient literature on leadership that searched for the individual kissed by the gods (charisma) to historical great man approaches (already limited by gender biases), people have been searching for a formula or magic elixir that explains leadership success. The current fascination is with the concept of *strengths*.

Now there's nothing inherently wrong with the notion that there are certain skills, knowledge, and attitudes that produce higher levels of performance in a task, whether it's sales, engineering, nursing, or hospitality. Leadership is required of all professions, and it has its own set of skills and abilities. So far, so good. But the strengths approach has been misapplied to mean that you should take on *only* tasks in which you are strong, not waste your time attending to your weaknesses, and in areas where you aren't strong and don't have natural talent, you or the organization should assign those tasks to other people.

That's not to say that people shouldn't attend to their strengths or that they aren't happier and more successful if they're using their strengths at work and in other aspects of their lives, but the emphasis on strengths has fundamentally discouraged people from challenging themselves to become better leaders. They can just throw up their hands and say, "Well, envisioning the future just isn't a strength of mine, so I'm not going to become very good at it." Or, "I'm not very comfortable letting people know how much I appreciate their accomplishments, so I won't bother." First, ignoring feedback about areas that you are not good at is inconsistent with a lot of research on learning (which we'll talk about later). Second, it's not very motivating to tell people to give up before they even start or the first time things don't go as well as expected. Finally, this thinking is impractical. Organizations can't bring in a new person every time someone makes a mistake or there's a new challenge that someone initially didn't have the skills and abilities to handle.

Over all the years we've been researching leadership, we've consistently found that adversity and uncertainty characterize every personal-best leadership experience (explained further in Chapter 3). Typically, they're challenges people have never faced before. Because this is true, the third fundamental of becoming an exemplary leader is *challenge yourself*. When confronting things they haven't done before, people will often have to develop new skills and overcome existing weaknesses and limitations. They make mistakes and may even feel incompetent. If people built only on strengths, they would likely not challenge themselves or their organizations. You simply can't do your best without searching for new experiences, doing things you've never done, making mistakes, and learning from them. Challenge is an important stimulus for leadership and for learning.

THE SELF-RELIANCE MYTH

No one ever made anything extraordinary happen alone. Leaders cannot possibly design breakthrough innovations, produce high-quality products, provide awesome service, attract raving fans, break sales records, ensure financial soundness and integrity, and build great places to work without the trust, teamwork, strength, and capabilities of everyone in the organization. Leadership is a team sport and not a solo performance.

Yet, there's folklore about the leader as hero who magnetizes a band of followers with courageous acts or the leader as rebel who charges headlong into the winds of resistance without regard for life or convention. There are myths about prescient visionaries with Merlin-like powers who save kingdoms, companies, industries, or nations. All this perpetuates a belief that leaders have to be self-reliant and superhuman. They have to be able to take care of themselves and get things done without the help of anyone else. They have to be independent and autonomous and never express doubts about their abilities. They can never appear in need of support or assistance—stiff upper lip, don't break a sweat, and all that balderdash.

Although there is certainly great benefit to being confident in your abilities to handle challenging situations, the best leaders know they can't do it alone. They know they need the support, engagement, and commitment of others. Isn't it intriguing to note that world-class athletes all have coaches, often more than one? These coaches are revered and celebrated—and thanked at every awards ceremony. Yet, rarely will you hear leaders even admit to having had a coach in the past, let alone one in the present, or broadcast about the training and development program they attended that helped them build their skills. They probably believe that people would consider it a weakness if they did, but just as leaders can't make extraordinary

things happen all by themselves, they can't become exemplary leaders by themselves either. That's why the fourth fundamental is to *engage support* in your learning and growth.

THE IT-COMES-NATURALLY MYTH

A corollary to the myths of talent and strengths is that leadership comes naturally to those who are the best at leading. People admire those who make it seem so easy and attribute that ease to natural ability. Whether it's a performer on stage, an athlete on the court, or a leader in an organization, people assume effortless performance develops without effort. Although there may be a small percentage for whom this is true, for the vast majority this is just not so.

K. Anders Ericsson, quoted earlier, made this same point when he said, "Until most individuals recognize that sustained training and effort is a prerequisite for reaching expert levels of performance, they will continue to misattribute lesser achievement to the lack of natural gifts, and will thus fail to reach their own potential."⁶

Anders and his colleagues have found in their research that raw talent is not the only requisite to becoming a top performer. Staggeringly high IQs don't characterize the great performers, either. What actually differentiates the expert performers from the good performers is their dedication to doing something every day to improve. The truth is that the best leaders become the best because they work hard at it and put in the hours of practice. Therefore, the fifth fundamental of becoming an exemplary leader is to *practice deliberately*.

Point this observation out to would-be leaders, and they often react by saying, "I don't have the time to practice. I'm already working 10 to 12 hours a day. It's just not possible to add on another couple of hours a day to practice leading." We'd

agree that you don't have any hours to add to your day. The knack is finding methods for turning your organization into a practice field and not just a playing field. There are ways you can structure your interactions with others so they become intentional practice routines. Practice is the antecedent of learning. The fundamental principle is that you have to put considerable effort into learning to lead to make leadership look effortless. No surprise that the more you practice, the easier it gets. That's why it's been said that amateurs make it look hard, and professionals make it look easy.

THE KEY MESSAGE AND ACTION

The key message in this chapter is this: Leadership potential and skills aren't talents that some people have and other people don't. They are much more broadly distributed than traditional legends suggest. You already have the capacity to lead, but some prevailing myths and assumptions about leadership get in the way of your becoming the best leader you can be. In the remainder of this book, let's confront those assumptions and learn about five fundamentals that you can apply to bust these myths, strengthen your capacity to lead, and make a difference.

SELF-COACHING ACTION

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked, "Can you, and those you work with, become better leaders than you are today?" Affirm that your answer is yes. Say aloud or silently to yourself, "I can become a better leader than I am today." Tell that to yourself daily. Make it a daily affirmation.

The next thing you should do is start a leadership journal that you can regularly use as you travel along on your leadership

development journey. McGill University Management Professor Nancy Adler finds that the best way to access the insights you gain from your experiences is to reflect on them daily. “Based on research (my own and others’) and many years of work with global business leaders as a consultant and international management professor,” she says, “I recommend the simple act of regularly writing in a journal.”⁷ So, purchase a notebook or open up a document on your computer or tablet to record your daily reflections. We’ll be asking you throughout this book to write down some thoughts and ideas, so make this leadership journal something you can refer to more than this once.⁸

For your first assignment in your leadership journal, write down three aspects of your leadership in which you’d like to become better. Maybe it’s about further strengthening something you now do well. Maybe it’s an area that isn’t a strong suit but is one you feel is important to improve.

Pick one area to start. Let’s say it’s asking for feedback. Now write down all the ways you can think of that you could become better at asking for feedback. Don’t worry at this moment whether they are practical; just brainstorm a list for yourself.

Select something from that list that you can and will do. Then, choose one colleague or friend you can trust to keep you honest in executing on it. Tell that person what you plan to do, and ask her or him to contact you daily and just inquire, “Did you do what you said you would do?”

You need to start sometime, so why not now?