

ARE LEADERS BORN OR MADE?

Answering the age-old question

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

As I embark upon addressing the subject of leadership in the first article for this column, I am driven to investigate and attempt to answer the fiercely debated question existing for decades about whether leaders are born or made.

To answer this age-old question, an initial step is to define a leader. Not surprisingly, there is a plethora of definitions of a leader. One impressive description of a leader was made by General Douglas MacArthur, who said, “A true leader has the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others. He does not set out to become a leader but becomes one by the equality of his actions and the integrity of his intent.”

Evidence that Leaders are Born

At first blush, it seems as if leaders are born. Our own experiences often support this conclusion. While traversing through life, we have all known individuals who are naturally endowed with the attributes of leadership. Others flock to them in whatever situation they find themselves, and they take center stage. Leaders are typically eloquent, either gently or boldly influencing and inspiring others through their indelible styles. Early in life, they are elected grade school student council presidents. In high school, they are captains of their soccer or football teams and editors of their yearbooks. In college, they become presidents of their fraternities or sororities and serve on university athletic boards. As adults, they appear as entrepreneurs, CEOs, politicians, religious leaders and serve on the boards of professional, charitable and civic organizations.

Aside from our encounters with inherent leaders, the conclusion that leadership is a birthright is embodied in the Great Man Theory, popularized two centuries ago by Scottish historian and author Thomas Carlyle. In support of the Great Man Theory, Carlyle said that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men.” A 2019 Villanova University online article titled “The Great Man Theory” expounded upon the theory and explained, “This school of thought espouses that great leaders are born, not made. These individuals come into the world possessing certain characteristics and traits not found in all people. These abilities enable them to lead while shaping the very pages of history.”

In examining the side of the debate that leaders are born, the U.S. National Library of Science noted the Great Man Theory in its article “Are Outstanding Leaders Born or Made?” in which the authors also purported that medical science seems to support that leaders are born. In studies on twins over the past 30 years or so, personality characteristics have been associated with the rs4950 genetic marker, which connects leadership with genetics. There are examples of identical twin leaders to further support that leadership is genetic, such as NASA astronauts and former U.S. Navy Captains Mark and Scott Kelly, as well as Julian and Joaquin Castro, who are a former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and a U.S. congressman, respectively. Additionally, this article looked to nature to resolve the debate about leaders being born or made. Specifically, the article



refers to the outcome of a study of three-spined stickleback fish, finding that “fish can learn to follow but struggle to take a leadership role.”

Personality tests also seem to support that leadership is genetically based. The well-known Myers-Briggs personality test identifies 16 different personality types, which have each been given a name based on the characteristics of the personality. “The Commander” personality type describes an individual who is extroverted, intuitive, thinking and judgmental. Famous Commanders include President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, 1960s civil rights leader Malcolm X, technology genius Steve Jobs and actor Harrison Ford. According to 16Personalities, a website about the Myers-Briggs test, “Commanders are natural-born leaders. People with this personality type embody the gifts of charisma and confidence and project authority in a way that draws crowds together behind a common goal.” True to their label, the Myers-Briggs test reveals that Commanders “are decisive people who love momentum and accomplishment. They gather information to construct their creative visions but rarely hesitate for long before acting on them.” The website also identifies Commanders’ negative traits, which include “an often ruthless level of rationality, using their drive, determination and sharp minds to achieve whatever end they’ve set for themselves.” According to the website, Commanders comprise only 3 percent of the population.

There’s More to Leadership Than Genetics

Certainly, more than 3 percent of the population are leaders, so one may be inclined to disagree with the conclusion that leadership is genetic. One needs only to recall legendary football coach Vince Lombardi’s famous quote that “Leaders are made, they are not born.” Others well versed on the subject of leadership more sharply disagree that leaders are born. American author Warren Bennis, who has had written numerous books on the subject of leadership, warned against the belief that leaders are born. “The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born — that there is a genetic factor to leadership. That’s nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born.”

Herbert Spencer, a sociologist who studied leadership and wrote about the Great Man Theory in “The Study of Sociology,” dismisses the conclusion that leadership is genetic; rather, he explained that the composition of a leader is far more complicated. Spencer said, “You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown ... Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.”

Critics of the conclusion that leaders are born and not made, including author and educational consultant Kendra Cherry, MS, also point to the fact that not all individuals who are endowed with leadership traits actually ascend to leadership roles. In her article titled “The Great Man Theory of Leadership,” published in Verywell Mind in 2020, Cherry cited Spencer’s “The Study of Sociology.” She challenged the belief that leaders are born and wrote, “Research has ... found that leadership is a surprisingly complex subject and that numerous factors influence how successful a particular leader may or may not be. Characteristics of the group, the leader in power, and the situation all interact to determine what type of leadership is needed and the effectiveness of this leadership.”

And the Answer is...

Ultimately, based upon personal experiences and research on whether leaders are born or made, this author concludes that both are true. Undoubtedly, evidence exists that certain people have been inherently endowed with leadership traits, which they can hone and use to propel them into leadership roles throughout their lives. However, leaders are not limited to those who are genetically inclined. Indeed, leadership skills can be taught, learned and cultivated, and anyone who strives to become a leader has that goal within his or her grasp. 🌟



Yasmin L. Stump, Esq. is IRWA Chapter 10 president. She is the president and founder of Yasmin L. Stump Law Group, PC in Indiana and has practiced in real estate transactions and litigation, as well as been a member of the right of way industry, for more than 30 years. Yasmin has 40 years of leadership experience with business and non-profit organizations and is authoring this new column, Leadership.