Leaders: Born or Made?

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In the assessment of individual student leaders' effectiveness, an understanding of personality is important. For years, the argument between social or situational learning and genetics, as well as the degree to which they play a role in our personalities, has been a debate among scientists in many different fields. Some scientists contend that genetics has little to do with our personalities, while others believe genetics is the main determinant in predicting individual personality. Hans Eysenck (1991), for example, argued that personality was primarily a function of genetics, while B.F. Skinner (1975) believed situational factors were the main determinant of personality.

In looking at personality, if we concede that genetics play the major role in its determination, we must also concede that leaders are born. On the other hand, if we believe situations determine our behavior, we must believe leadership can be taught.
In my graduate work, I pursued a simple theory that both genetics and situational learning play a role in our personalities. Bandura’s comments supported my own ideas when he stated, “Genetic factors affect behavioral potentialities. Both experiential and physiological factors interact, often in intricate ways, to determine behavior” (Bandura, 1986, p. 150).

An existing theory of leadership is trait theory, which suggests certain individuals have special innate or inborn characteristics or qualities that make them leaders (Northouse, 2001). Many theories have been developed in response to trait theory and have argued that leadership can be taught, but the evidence still suggests that certain characteristics or qualities are common among leaders. Northouse (2001) summarizes several studies and lists the following as common traits of leaders: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability.

I agree that these are common traits, but disagree that leaders are always born with them. My argument is that some may be born with a stronger disposition toward these traits, but we can also develop them as we continue to grow mentally. I believe that if any of these traits is lacking, student leaders can acquire that trait by applying themselves or seeking the help of others.

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A perfect example involves a friend of mine who entered college as a timid student who lacked direction and seemingly could have cared less about his life. That changed when I convinced him to join an organization with me. Now he is in graduate school and is a supervising orientation leader, in charge of a program that acquaints several thousand freshmen and their parents with the university. He lacked four of the five qualities listed, but he was able to gain them through involvement and the support of others. One definition of leadership offered by the Residence Hall Association at Oregon State University, “Leadership is inspiring others to become leaders,” really emphasizes this idea (Definition of Leadership, n.d.).

It is important to examine each of the traits listed above and determine their importance to leadership. Students should examine their personalities to determine where they fall on these five traits.

**Intelligence**

Intelligence is positively related to leadership. A student leader must have a working knowledge of an organization or have the ability to gain a working knowledge if they are to be effective as a leader. It is the capacity to gain knowledge that indicates intelligence. Many students can gain knowledge by being part of and getting involved with an organization before attempting to lead it. Students can also find a mentor to instruct them and guide them through this learning process.

However, Northouse (2001) suggests that too much intelligence can also work against a leader's ability to be effective. In some cases, more intelligent leaders may have difficulty communicating because their ideas are too advanced to be accepted by followers.

**Self-Confidence**

Self-confidence, the ability to be certain about one's competencies and skills, is a very important aspect in a leader's personality (Northouse, 2001). Self-confidence is directly related to self-concept and self-esteem. Self-concept is how an individual perceives oneself in a variety of areas, while self-esteem results from the comparison of oneself to others (Gladding, 2000). Without positive self-confidence, leaders cannot be effective because they will lack the belief that they can make a difference. Leadership involves influence. A positive self-concept, self-esteem and confidence in oneself will enable a leader to feel their attempts to influence can be effective.

**Determination**

A leader must have the drive to succeed. Determination refers to the desire to get the job done and includes characteristics such as initiative, persistence and dominance (Northouse, 2001). Student leaders are going to have to be willing to assert themselves and be proactive. Determined leaders have a vision and are willing to make sacrifices to achieve that vision.

**Integrity**

I agree with others who've described integrity as doing the right thing when no one is looking. Student leaders who display integrity have a strong personal set of morals by which they live. These leaders are able to gain the trust of their peers because they are consistent in their actions. Integrity also includes ethics. By having the integrity to do the right thing, make tough decisions, student leaders not only gain trust but respect as well.

**Sociability**

Sociability refers to a student's ability to seek and maintain social relationships. It is difficult to influence others if you cannot relate to them on any level. Student leaders who display sociability are friendly, courteous, tactful and diplomatic (Northouse, 2001). These leaders are also able to create cooperative relationships between other members of their organization. It is not uncommon to refer to a student who displays this trait as a politician.
Leadership: A Translatable Skill

It is important to note that these five personality traits outlined by Northouse (2001) are not all the traits a leader should display, just those he feels are the most vital to leadership. Student leaders vary in the degree to which they display these traits. For example, some student leaders may be more sociable than others, some more intelligent.

A student leader is merely part of an organization, usually elected to lead the group but sometimes appointed. With any position comes responsibility and expectation. As a leader of an organization in a university setting, the student is expected to be all knowing when it comes to the organization. In reality, this is impossible.

Students should evaluate their strengths and weaknesses with regard to these skills and focus on improving their weaknesses. Many people become stronger leaders through hard work and determination.

Leadership also has applications that extend beyond the university setting. It is valuable in all types of career fields and the university provides an opportunity for students to gain a broad-based leadership experience. The value of such a venture cannot be measured. Therefore, students should make the most of their leadership experience and strive to be effective as student leaders.

References


About the Author

Charlie Hueber is assistant director of Student Affairs at Stephen F. Austin State University (TX), where he previously served as program coordinator and graduate assistant. Active in NACA, he serves as the Educational and Professional Development Coordinator for NACA Central. In his community, he serves on the board of directors for Millard’s Crossing, a historical village, as well as the board of directors for Nacogdoches Safe and Drug Free. He holds a bachelor’s degree in speech communication and a master’s degree in counseling and psychology from Stephen F. Austin State University.