

WHAT MAKES A LEADER?

Theories through Time Part 1

Leadership isn't like math or science. There aren't many absolutes. Theories about what makes a leader have been argued literally for centuries. There are no right or wrong answers. There are, however, lots of interesting alternatives.

Understanding how people come to be leaders can help us do a better job identifying who has leadership potential and developing those leaders to their full potential.

Let's look at leadership theories through the years.

Great Man Theory

Some people are simply born leaders, like queens and kings – that’s the Great Man Theory in a nutshell. It’s like leadership is in someone’s DNA, as inevitable as eye color. The Great Man Theory says there is no real nature vs. nurture debate for leadership. Leaders are born to lead and that trait comes to light when the opportunity or need presents itself.

Trait Theory

As researchers sought to understand leadership and leaders, they identified common traits that seemed to be shared by successful leaders. In many ways, the Trait Theory is an extension of the Great Man Theory. It postulates that people are born with certain traits that make them leaders. Some traits identified in potential leaders are drive, leadership motivation, honesty and integrity, self-confidence, cognitive ability and knowledge of the business. Having the right traits does not guarantee leadership will emerge; not having them guarantees it will not. Some researchers also believe there are five personality traits that are vital to leadership: low neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Over time, researchers are continuously identifying and examining other traits that determine leadership for further study.

Behavioral Approach Theory

Leaders can be made – that’s one of the implications of the Behavioral Approach Theory. It offers that leadership behavior can be summarized and grouped into four major categories:

- > Task-oriented behaviors that create structure for teams with specific goals, objectives, expectations, measurement and rewards.
- > Relational-oriented behaviors that create trust and respect while encouraging followers to act in the best interest of the overall group.
- > Change-oriented behaviors that seek to drive change and innovation by setting a mission and vision that the team can follow and believe in.
- > Passive behaviors or Laissez-Faire Leadership that doesn’t take action unless required to address issues or challenges.

These behaviors can be monitored, encouraged and taught to build effective leadership to drive outcomes.

Transactional and Transformational Leadership Theories

Transactional and Transformational Leadership seem like common-sense concepts. Transactional Leadership is based on interaction between Leader and follower. The Leader specifies desired goals and tasks, with clearly defined rewards for achievement. Transformational Leaders share a detailed vision for the future and work on improving followers’ skills to bring that vision to life. Transactional Leaders are better at maintaining the status quo and keeping the ship on course. Transformational Leaders are more effective at leading change and inspiring growth of the group for the common good.