

From Inside Out: Beyond Teaching About Leadership

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Teaching *about* leadership is necessary to enable others to lead effectively, but it is not sufficient. Not sufficient in the sense that leadership requires **doing** and leadership development therefore requires action-learning (or learning on the job) to find one's voice, develop, and hone one's skills. After years of not only writing about leadership but also serving in a leadership role in higher education, let me confess that it is much easier to teach or even simply write about leadership than it is to be a leader.

The truth is that most leadership theory is fine. Really. We can argue about the right, proper, or best theory, but pick nearly any treatise off the bookshelf and what it says about being an effective leader is mostly fine. The theory makes sense; it is just that the application is more challenging than we can rightfully convey in a book and that the noise, or unexplained variance in a statistical sense, in any real situation is often much greater than we can describe empirically or in many cases literally imagine. Which accounts for why some people say that leadership is an art and not a science and, by the way, this is not typically meant to be a compliment, or that leadership subsequently cannot be taught, or that leadership explains very little about why things go well or poorly, and the like.

Leadership is Learnable

The notion that leadership is magical, ethereal, esoteric, or reserved for only a very few is reinforced every time someone asks, "Are leaders born or made?" Whenever asked this question, which is almost every time I give a speech, conduct a class, or workshop my answer, always offered with a smile, is this: "Yes, of course, all leaders are born. We've never met a leader who wasn't. So are all accountants, artists, athletes, parents, zoologists, you name it. We're all born. What we do with what we have before we die is up to us!"

My colleague and co-author Jim Kouzes and I have been ranting for years that it is just pure myth that only a lucky few can ever understand the intricacies of leadership. Leadership is not a gene, and it is not a secret code that cannot be deciphered by ordinary people. The truth is that leadership is an observable set of

skills and abilities that are useful whether one is seated in the executive suite or standing on the front line on Wall Street, Main Street, or College Avenue. And any skill can be developed, strengthened and enhanced given the motivation and desire along with practice and feedback, role models, and coaching (Kouzes & Posner, 2008).

It is very curious and revealing that no one has ever asked us, “Can management be taught? Are managers born or made?” Why is it that management is viewed as a set of skills and abilities, while leadership is typically seen as a set of innate personality characteristics? It is simple. People assume management can be taught. Because they do, hundreds of schools have established degree programs and each year thousands of management courses are taught. By assuming that people can learn the attitudes, skills, and knowledge associated with good management practices, schools and companies have raised the caliber of managers. They have also contributed to the idea that good management skills are attainable.

The same can be said for leadership. In over 25 years of research, we have been fortunate to have heard and read the stories of thousands of ordinary people who have led others to get extraordinary things done. It is not the absence of leadership potential that inhibits the development of more leaders; it is the persistence of the myth that leadership can’t be learned. This haunting myth is a far more powerful deterrent to leadership development than is the nature of the person or the basics of the leadership process.

A mid-career graduate student made an observation. He recalled an address given to him and his classmates at the Naval Academy in 1992 by General Colin Powell. “The General told the assembled Brigade of Midshipmen that one of the tenets of a good leader is to never stop learning. He stressed that we must use every experience, good or bad, to strengthen our leadership identity.” This student went on to say that “this past quarter I have been able to take away several valuable lessons from my Leadership Development Plan. Among the leadership lessons I learned, the impact of making time for practicing good leadership strikes me as the most significant.” That is the point. You cannot learn to be a good leader without having experience as a leader. And that experience begins with an exploration of one’s inner territory.

Leadership is an Inside Job

There is a basic problem with the way many schools teach leadership. Leadership needs to be taught differently than content-based courses. Leadership is driven more by internal forces than by external forces, and thus the development of leaders is fundamentally the development of the inner self. Few schools address that aspect of our students. After all, it is difficult to translate inner self

development with GRE, LSAT, GMAT scores or to the percentage of graduates hired or their average starting salaries. Organizations can only pay people to manage. There is no pay scale for leadership. In this light, there are few extrinsic reasons for students to learn to lead at all.

The reasons to lead are, by nature, intrinsic. It is hard to imagine anyone getting up day after day to put in the countless hours to get extraordinary things accomplished unless they have their heart in it. Leadership is about doing the things that go beyond a job description, like caring and personal sacrifice. Students must learn that they will have to give up something, whether it is a meal, a night of sleep, or even possibly their last breath, if they want to make a difference. Leadership is hard work; work that is not generally reflected in starting salaries or ending ones for that matter.

Organizations may pay our graduates to manage, but they will succeed because of the leadership they exhibit. In this regard, raw talent or ability is overrated. Organizations will prosper more by gaining a one percent improvement in 100 people than they will by getting the most talented individual to do 100% better. The question for schools is not how they can identify so-called “natural-born leaders.” The question is: *How can we help all of our students improve and develop the leadership potential they already have?*

Find Your Voice

In our studies and seminars (Kouzes & Posner, 2007), we have asked thousands of people to list the historical leaders they most admired – leaders they could imagine themselves following *willingly*. While no single leader received a majority of the nominations, the two most frequently mentioned were Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. Lincoln and King: two leaders a century apart, both come from times of national struggle. Other historical leaders who have made the list include Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus, Mohammed, Moses, Golda Meir, Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Mother Teresa.

What do these admired leaders have in common? In reviewing the list of individuals nominated for most admired leader, we found that the entire list was populated by people with unwavering commitment to principles. They were passionate about their causes. The message is clear. We admire those who speak out. We admire, and are willing to follow, those who stand up for their beliefs.

People expect their leaders to speak out on matters of value and conscience. But how can you speak out if you do not know what to speak about? How can you stand up for your beliefs, if you do not know what you stand for? Leaders who are not clear about what they believe are likely to change their position with every fad or

opinion poll. Without core beliefs and with only shifting positions, would-be leaders are judged as inconsistent and derided for being political in their behavior.

Perhaps this is why so many people have become cynical about leadership. They know that before politicians speak they have consulted their pollsters for exactly how to phrase their message. They know that senior executives have speech writers to craft just the right language. But we all know deep down that people can only speak the truth when speaking in their own voice. The techniques and tools that fill the pages of management and leadership books – including our own – are not substitutes for who and what you are. In fact, they can boomerang if thrown by a spin-meister who has mastered form, but not substance.

Where leaders must go to find their voice is within. We have to get our students to explore their inner territory. We take a few steps in this direction when we ask them such questions as: What do you *stand* for? What do you *believe* in? What are you *discontent* about? What makes you *jump for joy*? What keeps you *awake at night*? Just what is it that you really *care about*? To act with integrity, you must first know who you are. You must know what you stand for, what you believe in, and what you care most about. Clarity of values provides the confidence to make the tough decisions, to act with determination, and to take charge of your life.

When first learning to lead, students often read biographies and autobiographies about famous leaders. They read textbooks by dedicated scholars and trade books by experienced executives. They attend speeches by decorated military officers. They buy tapes by motivational speakers and participate in training programs with skilled facilitators. They do all this in order to master the fundamentals, the tools, and the techniques. As a result, while clumsy at first, failing more than succeeding, they soon can give a speech with ease, conduct a meeting with grace, and praise a colleague with style. Many have passed the course.

Later in their lives they will notice how that last speech sounded mechanically rote, how that last meeting was a boring routine, and how that last encounter felt terribly sad and empty. They awaken to the frightening thought that the words are not theirs, that the vocabulary is someone else's that the technique is right out of a textbook, but not straight from their hearts.

Most leadership development programs are primarily about copying other people's styles. It is still mostly about trying to mimic the great leaders. It is often based on the erroneous assumption that authentic leadership can come from the outside in. It cannot. It comes from the inside out. You have to be the author of your own story and not the reader of someone else's. You cannot lead through someone else's words. You cannot lead out of someone else's experience. As responsible educators, we must help students learn how to authentically communicate their beliefs through their words and actions that uniquely represent who they are.

Leaders Learn Through Practice, They “Do”

Jim Kouzes and I talk about leadership *practices* in our work because we know that it is only through disciplined practice that mastery can be achieved. In every leadership seminar I teach, students do not always appreciate at the onset that (a) I really do not have anything to teach them that they do not already know and (b) becoming a better leader only happens when they “do leadership.” We should assign students projects that require them to go out and lead and then come back and reflect on that experience. Only then will they learn to be better leaders.

Of course, I provide them with ideas, concepts, techniques, strategies, and all the other gadgets in a leader’s tool kit in an effort to make this assignment successful. But they soon realize that the value of this assignment and the course cannot be measured by the grade they receive. Its value lies in the insights they glean as they reflect on their experiences, whether their outcomes were successful or not. Where learning happens is in their realization of what they would do differently given another opportunity.

Indeed, the reflective assignment can be so simple and direct as “How can you be a better leader? Determine an area of leadership that you want to improve and/or build upon and take some action(s) to do so. Analyze what you did, what impact it had, what you learned and what you would do differently the next time around.” Projects have spanned the gamut from study group projects to workplace team development, community or volunteer organizing, startups, and even child rearing.

Too often schools teach students *about* leadership; *about* leadership theories and concepts as “applied” to leading. Learning about leadership is not the same as learning to *be* a leader. Students often learn *about* what it takes to be a great leader, but they do not learn to *be* leaders nearly often enough. Just as medical students cannot become surgeons unless they operate on live patients, just as priests cannot find their faith unless they work with suffering members of their congregations, just as elected officials cannot make budget allocations without trade-offs between competing goods, so students cannot become leaders if their learning is restricted to the classroom.

This was precisely the conclusion one of my students recently came to at the end of the term. He wrote “I used to think that leadership is something one is born with or without. However, I learned that although some people may be a ‘natural leader,’ that leadership can also be learned. The main reason is that it’s not just ability, such as ability to run fast or paint a photographic portrait on a canvas, but it’s also an understanding of what makes each of us tick...Many other books I’ve read and leadership training courses that I’ve taken do not adequately or clearly

convey the concept of learn-ability of leadership from an inside-out point of view. Instead those courses and books jump into and focus mostly on mechanics of what to do, thereby missing the internal foundation that leadership builds upon.”

And another student explained that exploring his inner territory led him to realize “passion inspires me to lead and that I will need to make manifest in my work those things I am passionate about.” As a result of exploring what was really important, he became both clear and conscious of his values.

Feeling more grounded and confident he explained how this insight directly impacted his leadership behavior indicating: “I’d assumed a new position with responsibility for my company’s relationships with the Wall Street brokerage analysts who publish recommendations on our stock. We’ve been suffering from Wall Street’s perception that our competitor was gaining momentum in the market. Whereas I might ordinarily wait for my boss (who previously drove this function) to help devise a response, I felt confident in developing an engagement plan, crafting the story and messages, setting up meetings with analysts, and pulling senior managers into interviews to tell the analysts how we planned to compete and recover lost ground. Identifying my values and finding my voice was what gave me the confidence to take such a risk in my first weeks in a very visible new job.”

There’s another, more tangible benefit we see when students do leadership: They often record a number of remarkable accomplishments, most of which would not have happened if they were not *required to do something different*. There are no shortages of opportunities to lead and make a difference. Consider what another student wrote at the end of the semester: “Overall, the past three months enhanced my leadership style. This exercise has been personally rewarding and has led to a deeper understanding of my strengths and weaknesses. At work, the teams I lead have a greater sense of shared values, and seem to have higher morale. In circumstances where I am just a team member, my advice is sought out by people more experienced than me. My management has recognized and rewarded me for my leadership contributions, and I have been put into a position where I have responsibility for training and mentoring new program managers and technical project managers. The challenges of improving my leadership skills have raised my interest in work and reduced the routine nature of some of my professional responsibility. As a result of this focused effort on leadership, I am a better leader and I have a deeper understanding that leadership is a journey of continuous development.”

Ask the Right Question

Think about the impact of this question: “What will be your legacy?” This is the first question I ask at the start of the required course on leadership for all business school students at Santa Clara University. I ask them this question and then pause. While no one quickly offers a response to this question, they all write it down. They wait for me to provide the answer. In fact, they typically leave some space in their notes, after writing down this question for when I provide them the answer to this question. After a few moments of awkward silence between us, I let them off the hook by telling them that I do not really expect them to have the answer to this question, as if it had a single answer, or possibly even an answer to this question, at this stage in their lives.

What I do tell them is that this is one of the most important questions they need to consider in order to lead a life with intention, to lead their lives forwards rather than backwards. The truth is that each and every one of us will leave a legacy and the only question to ponder is whether it is the one we intended or even wished for. *What will be your legacy* is a question that they need to ponder constantly, asking themselves what difference are they making by their actions, even by their very presence?

Thinking about legacies motivates a life lived forward. In our book, *A Leader’s Legacy* (Kouzes & Posner, 2006), we note that thinking about a legacy can be extremely energizing and uplifting. It forces thinking about today’s actions in a larger context. It requires an appreciation of others. None of us are the sole inhabitants of our organizations or our communities. We do not live alone. This kind of forward thinking requires people to take responsibility for their own actions with a realization that these will always have consequences, if not immediately, for sure in the future. The legacy perspective explicitly reveals that each one of us makes a difference. Then the only question remaining to consider is, “*What kind of difference do I want to make?*”

Thinking about legacies requires moving beyond short-term definitions of success. Legacies encompass past, present, and future. We bring students face-to-face with questions of “who are you” and “why are you here.” They have to consider more deeply the true value of what was, what is, and what will be. A heartfelt quest to leave a lasting legacy brings about a transformation from focusing on success to aspirations of impact and significance.

Leadership is in the Moment

As leadership educators and developers the questions we get our students to ask themselves have a tremendous impact on both their desire and ability to lead. Most

important, they learn to lead by leading, beginning with leading themselves. With that realization, I believe that in the future we should move beyond talking to students about leadership. We must create opportunities for them to be leaders, to do leadership. When we design these learning experiences right we can liberate the leader within everyone. This was precisely the insight which one student reported in her final reflective essay: “With almost every previous leadership workshop I have been a part of in the past, the actual work on leadership skills ended 45 seconds after we were dismissed. We may have looked at surveys from our peers where they gave us anonymous, honest feedback on our leadership styles. We may have even performed some advanced self-reflection. During the workshops, we learned about leadership theory, heard tales of great leadership moments, and worked in teams on challenging problems, exposing the importance of leadership. This course was different in two ways. First, there is a natural and organic structure to the five key areas of exemplary leadership. It is a structure that allows for focusing one’s energies in areas that require the most attention. They also provide a sort of troubleshooter’s guide to benchmark your efforts against to create the most productive and inspired environment with one’s teams. Second, learning did not end when we left the classroom. I have never before spent as much time and energy after a productive workshop reflecting on my own leadership style, articulating and refining my leadership goals, and actually practicing my leadership skills. As with the pursuit of mastery of any new skill, we must develop a habit of success which is usually earned through dealing with familiar situations in entirely new ways.”

Each day provides our students (truly each one of us) the chance to become better leaders. Each day offers opportunities to provide leadership. Each day serves up the prospect of leaving a legacy. Here is how one student nailed this same point, when he concluded: “The first important lesson that I have learned is that leadership is a lifelong practice, it is not necessarily inherent. While I do believe that there are some born leaders, individuals who have a natural talent to lead, even those leaders can improve if they practice the skills and focus on daily improvement. More importantly perhaps, it is not a weakness to need to, and choose to, practice leadership skills. It is another step in the desire for self-improvement, one that allows for ever greater achievement through the powers of high performing teams working effectively toward a common purpose.”

As our colleague John Maxwell, himself the author of numerous books on leadership, told us, “It’s been said that there are two kinds of people in life: those who make things happen and those who wonder what happened. Leaders have the ability to make things happen. People who don’t know how to make things happen for themselves won’t know how to make things happen for others.” He went on to tell us that “what you do with the future means the difference between leaving a track record and leaving a legacy.”

Developing leaders is not the result of wishful thinking, reading a book, or taking a class. Developing leaders is the result of determined doing, from the inside out.

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