

# Developing future leaders

17 May 2010 | Mitch McCrimmon

There is almost universal agreement that leadership is a skill that can be learned. This belief is based on a conventional definition of leadership which is jumbled together with management. But there are many ways to show leadership outside of managerial roles.

So what if we change the definition of leadership?

Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela had a one-off leadership impact on their respective governments without being members of those governments and having no authority within them. Similarly, when knowledge workers promote new products to management, they have a one-off leadership impact with no managerial authority over their bosses.

Leading by example is not restricted to those in managerial roles. Employees can show leadership by example to their colleagues. And companies can show leadership by example with innovative products despite having no managerial authority over their markets.

## Managerial versus Pure Leadership

Why bother about odd instances of leadership when we should focus on what it takes to be a managerial leader? But the meaning of leadership may need to change for a more dynamic, less hierarchical, fluid and increasingly complex world. It could be that managerial leadership suits relatively stable groups but not the other end of the spectrum.

Pure leadership means showing the way for others, either by example or by explicitly promoting a new direction. Whenever you take a stand in a meeting and your colleagues accept your argument, you have shown leadership without your actually taking charge of the group.

People can show such leadership without either the talent or the inclination to manage those who follow. Such leadership is pure influence and it comes to an end once followers buy the proposition. Implementation is a separate phase which can be managed by others.

## Leadership Traits

Fewer traits are required to show pure leadership than what it takes to be an executive. All you need is an idea for a better way, however small and local, the courage to promote it and [the influencing skills to get people to listen](#).

Courage and influencing skills are as situational as the idea itself, however. Their requirement depends on the magnitude of the change, the strength of resistance and whether the merits of the proposal can be demonstrated. Advocating greener, but expensive, practices, requires courage, sharp influencing skills and strong evidence of benefits.

But suppose you are a front-line innovator who comes up with an idea for an iPhone-beater. If

you can demonstrate to management that you are onto something big, you shouldn't need much courage to promote it. And if they buy it, you will have shown leadership upwards on a one-off basis. Even if you have poor influencing skills, senior management might buy your idea if it is compelling enough.

This example illustrates how leadership can be shown in some circumstances without any special skills beyond having a great idea, where content really is king! While you need courage and polished influencing skills in other situations, the fact that such traits are not universally essential shows that leadership cannot be defined in a way that requires them.

### **Leadership and Creativity**

Your drive to show pure leadership is based on your desire to differentiate yourself, make your mark, challenge the status quo and create a better world. It's based on youthful rebelliousness, the same drive that fuels creativity and we know that younger people are often the most creative.

[Leadership and creativity are similar but different](#). You can show leadership by advocating someone else's idea if you aren't personally creative.

Creativity can't be learned although you can develop some related skills such as how to [brainstorm to foster creative thinking](#). The drive to lead has the same basis as the drive to create and is similarly unlearned.

### **Nurturing Future Leaders**

Like creativity, leadership can be fostered with nurturing and support. While it is possible to have a leadership impact with poor influencing skills if the content is sufficiently compelling, employees could be more successful showing leadership with stronger influencing skills.

Unlike the basic drive to differentiate oneself, [influencing skills can be learned](#). But such skills are also used in sales so they are not uniquely leadership skills.

### **Executive Development**

If leadership means simply showing the way for others, then what is currently called leadership development needs to be reframed as executive development. This might be hard for the leadership development industry to swallow.

Like sex, leadership sells. It's what executives want to buy. But the leadership development industry should lead by example and offer programs to fit what leadership means in a world dominated by rapidly shifting ideas.

Ethics, integrity, emotional intelligence, how to get the best out of people, among other topics, constitute executive development, not leadership development.

Daniel Goleman said that maturity is another word for [emotional intelligence](#). The implication for young knowledge workers is that they need to grow up before they can be considered leaders. How disempowering, not to say patronizing, is that?

Ironically, urging budding young leaders to become more emotionally intelligent could be disastrous if it dampens their leadership instincts thus turning leaders into managers. But this is what the current leadership development industry is really doing: turning leaders into

managers!

Executives also show leadership as distinct from management, such as Lou Gerstner's recognition that IBM needed a radical change of direction. He was a newcomer to IBM however. Like young people, newcomers are often more creative than long-term employees.

### **Pure Leadership Examples**

#### Practical Steps for Growing Leaders

- Reframe leadership as a one-off act that can be shown up as well as down.
- Clearly differentiate leadership from management.
- Upgrade management so it is seen as a supportive, facilitative function.
- Train budding leaders to focus on content first, influencing skills second.
- Coach managers on how to foster bottom-up challenges.
- Reward teams and those who manage them for generating the most useable ideas.

#### Benefits

- Greater chance of winning the war of ideas through faster innovation
- More fully engaged knowledge workers.
- More widely distributed ownership for organizational direction.
- Less pressure on executives to be heroes, to monopolize ownership.

We have two kinds of leadership. One involves being in charge of a group. The other is a one-off act of influence which can come from any direction, bottom-up as well as top-down or

from outside the business:

- The Sony employee who developed PlayStation showed leadership bottom-up when he convinced Sony management to adopt his product.
- Martin Luther King had a leadership impact on government when his demonstrations against segregation on buses led the U.S. Supreme Court to ban such discrimination.
- Jack Welch's ideas, such as being number one or two in a market, had a leadership impact on businesses around the world.
- Apple shows leadership to its competitors in music, software and cell phones.
- A new employee works in a much greener way than colleagues and, without explicitly advocating it, others gradually follow suit.

These examples of leadership share some common features:

- Showing the way for others either by example or explicit advocacy.
- Not in charge of those led or involved in execution.
- Completely distinct from management.
- Can come from any direction, including outside the organization.
- One-off, discrete acts of influence thus impacts, not ongoing roles.
- Being ephemeral, it rapidly shifts to others.

Such leadership is what innovation-driven businesses need to win the war of ideas. This leadership can only be nurtured, not developed. Only influencing skills can be learned.

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