

Leadership — Genetic or Learned?

An Informal Analysis of “Born to Lead” vs. Personal Effort, Tenacity, and Experience

BRAD MOHR

It has been said leadership is an innate quality — that either one is a leader or a follower. Leadership has been considered as more genetic than learned. It involves charisma and the force of personality. A natural leader will always emerge in a group, and followers will naturally fall in line behind a dynamic leader possessing the qualities of leadership. Alexander the Great or Gen. George S. Patton certainly fit this pattern of leadership, as do numerous other famous figures.

But there are other examples of leaders who did not come naturally to leadership. Some examples of leaders who have developed through personal effort, tenacity, and experience include Abraham Lincoln, Harry S. Truman, Sam Walton of Wal-Mart, and Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. These men were not born leaders, but worked to become leaders through hard work, vision, and purpose. They assumed leadership through sweat and effective goal setting. These individuals are examples of “educated leaders” who knew what they wanted and implemented a plan to succeed. They took action to achieve their goals.

Most people are not natural leaders, but as program managers, leadership is imperative to the success of a program. The program manager must inspire his team to achieve goals and ensure the team shares the vision. At the same time, the program manager must be able to energize the team to perform and imbue subordinates with a sense of purpose. The program manager is an organizer of

process as well as people. Being able to organize people so a definitive goal might be realized defines leadership more than any other factor. A leader motivates and achieves “buy-in” by subordinates. If one

is not a natural leader by default, then the only alternative is to become “educated” in leadership attributes and modify one’s behavior to assume those leadership qualities.



Mohr is Technology Manager, Program Executive Office-Intelligence Information Systems, U.S. Special Operations Command, MacDill AFB, Fla. He is a recent graduate of the Advanced Program Management Course (APMC 99-3), DSMC.

Many emerging program managers begin their careers as technical personnel and advance to positions of management. Once program managers, they are forced to assume the role as leader – they forsake the mantle of management of a process to assume leadership of people. They must rise above the process to become motivators. All program managers

thority to make decisions, knowing their leader does so with trust in their abilities. Leaders also proactively gather information and insist on productive results.

According to former Advanced Program Management Course (APMC) respondents, leaders have vision and are capable of taking risks; they are communi-

possibilities. A leader must be flexible and adaptable. A leader must be a practical risktaker, devoid of the fear of failure.¹

If an individual is not a “natural leader,” then what can someone do to adopt leadership qualities? According to Anthony Robbins, a renowned self-help lecturer, behavior modification is the key to change. Every individual is capable of change, providing the will to change is strong enough. Change is not a factor of thought – it is based on action. The desire to change will not produce results without behavioral modification.

The avoidance of pain or the search for pleasure prompts every human behavior. The behaviors or feelings that give us pleasure or satisfaction are instinctively fostered and nourished. Pain creates avoidance of behaviors or feelings that cause discomfort. How do we overcome the pain associated with behavioral change? Robbins says pain itself creates the environment for change. Behavioral change is possible when the pain of facing the results of ineffectual leadership is stronger than the reluctance to adopt new leadership approaches.

Robbins asserts that behavior changes when you “interrupt the pattern.” One must use other techniques to actually alter behavior. This requires an individual to recognize and acknowledge the “pain” associated with continuing unsuccessful behavioral patterns.

Adopting new behaviors cannot happen overnight, but must be nurtured on a daily basis. Behavior is based on “rituals” – we are used to reacting in certain ways based on experience or education. These “rituals” result in ingrained habits. The habits we acquire form the basis of our character and, ultimately, our destiny in life.

For example, people will feel they cannot trust the decisions of others. This results in a habit of never accepting the advice of others, leading to a pattern of micromanagement and a complete rejection of the principle of empowerment. The key to behavioral change is to “break

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must be strongly committed to the mission to succeed. They must look at the “Big Picture” and provide a method for achieving that end. Program managers must be systematic as well as innovative in their approach to mission achievement. They must select the appropriate personnel to support the program and empower those personnel with the au-

cators and possess people skills; and provide integrity as well as technical and program knowledge. Clearly, these attributes do not come easily to most individuals. We feel secure in treading the path of our past experience, feel uncomfortable entrusting to another those responsibilities we have in the past taken for ourselves, possess egos that prevent us from taking the advice of another, and find it difficult to open our minds to new

the pattern” and adopt different behaviors that mark true character change.

Behavioral change requires repetition. It is based on practice and the personal resolve to repeat actions one desires to acquire for the future. Only through the daily practice and personal application of leadership traits can the individual excel in positions of leadership. This conscious effort required to change becomes a desire with a specific goal as an end — to become a leader. Robbins states these desires become goals, and adherence to these goals “creates the future in advance,” the “future” meaning success as a more effective leader.²

According to author Ken Blanchard, quality leadership is comprised of vision, productivity, innovation, intellectual curiosity, integrity, the knowledge of “leading edge” principles, and courage.³ All behaviors associated with these attrib-

utes of leadership can be learned and applied to daily actions. Robbins says the unwillingness to change or adopt behavioral patterns that result in ultimate success is predicated on fear — fear the action will result in failure, or that change itself is uncomfortable. Both instances cause pain, which, in turn, deters change.

But what are the results of a lack of leadership? For a program manager, ineffective leadership can mean a totally dysfunctional working environment and spells catastrophe for the program. The pain created by the management of an unsuccessful program due to ineffective leadership is felt by the program manager as well as everyone else on the team.

Avoiding the pain of failure is certainly more of a motivator than feeling the pain associated with behavioral change. Leadership does not require a precise genetic

trait; rather, it only requires the willingness to adopt positive attributes, through daily behavior modification.

Every leader requires courage. For program managers the courage to change is perhaps the most courageous act of all.

Editor’s Note: The author welcomes questions or comments on this article. Contact him at (813) 828-2988 or mohrbe@gte.net.

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2. Robbins, Anthony, *Personal Power*, San Diego, Calif., Robbins Research International, Inc., 1993.
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SOLOWAY DIRECTS ESTABLISHMENT OF NEW CHANGE MANAGEMENT CENTER

Stan Z. Soloway, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition Reform), Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition, Technology and Logistics) has directed establishment of the Change Management Center (CMC). In a Dec. 23, 1999, memorandum, Soloway:

- Directed that the CMC take the lead in accelerating acquisition and logistics reform initiatives, while providing a resource for change management across the Department.
- Directed the CMC to explore with the Defense Acquisition University adopting key attributes of the corporate university approach to provide education and training for the acquisition, technology and logistics workforce.
- Directed the CMC to pursue and incorporate where possible, cross-functional teaming across the Defense business enterprise to accelerate organizational goals and manage change.

The CMC will use rapid improvement activities to bring together diverse stakeholders within the Department, industry associations, and other partners. These rapid improvement activities focus attention on developing, implementing, and measuring new and innovative business practices while overcoming obstacles to acquisition and logistics reform. Moreover, the rapid improvement activities are based on a commercial methodology tailored for federal government applications.

The lead for all CMC activity is William Mounts, Director, International and Commercial Systems Acquisition, (703) 614-3882 or E-mail mountsw@acq.osd.mil. Further information on CMC activities can be downloaded from the DUSD(AR) Web site at <http://www.acq.osd.mil/ar/cmc>.

