



But can you teach it? The big question on leadership

US correspondent, Carl Pritchard, addresses the age-old conundrum

Leadership is innate. Leadership can be trained. Those two perspectives seem to be at odds—one with the other, and cause extensive consternation in many project communities. Just defining leadership is difficult. Leadership, according to Project Management Terms (ESI International) by LeRoy Ward, is ‘the use of influence to direct the activities of others toward accomplishment of some objective’. Ward’s definition goes a long way toward clarifying what we’re supposed to be ‘doing’ under a leader, but doesn’t inherently capture just what a leader is. Leadership may be like US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of obscenity offered down through the years: ‘I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.’ The challenge in defining leadership may rest in the varied dimensions of leadership practice.

Most project managers acknowledge a variety of dimensions to leadership. Steve Nichols was the project manager for the decommissioning of a nuclear reactor for Portland General (Oregon, USA). His performance received accolades from many circles, including the Project Management Institute, which afforded Nichols’ teams’ efforts their ‘International Project of the Year’ award for 2001. In an interview with *Project Manager Today*, Nichols says: ‘It’s a combination of learned and innate. There are a lot of skills and there’s a lot of knowledge that can be taught or learned. But it’s impacted by an individual’s personality and how he or she addresses issues and performs’. He stresses that not everyone is born to

leadership. ‘Some people could sit in a class all day and you wouldn’t see them perform.’

The threads seem to be somewhat consistent as you talk with leaders in a variety of professions and environments. Are there some skills that are inherently associated with leaders? Yes. Among them? Listening, motivation, cooperation, decisiveness, intuition, teamwork, persistence, vision, enthusiasm, self-confidence, delegation, empathy and drive. And leaders interviewed acknowledge that at least some of the quality can be reviewed, practised and coached.

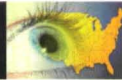
Nichols’ successful nuclear plant decommissioning was highlighted by a few of the key leadership success factors. ‘Our success was rooted in two critical issues: optimism that you could succeed, and at the same time, the persistence to do that,’ says Nichols. ‘We had a lot of roadblocks that consistently came up. You had to have the persistence to get through them and to see them as hurdles, rather than roadblocks.’ As to whether those qualities could have been taught? ‘Persistence, maybe,’ Nichols offers. ‘We found the appropriate solutions and we resolved

these issues as we got to them.’

Robert Yourzak of the Minneapolis (Minn, USA) project management and engineering consulting firm, Robert Yourzak and Associates, says there’s a chemistry involved between the innate and the learned.

‘Some attract the information better than others. Because of the ease of learning of some individuals, you’ll see [learned





leadership] in some people. You see how some people grasp material more readily than others. Some of us develop and get 'ah-hahs!' quicker, depending on our own strengths.'

What does it take to be a leader?

Can everyone be a leader? 'That's a relative statement,' says Yourzak. 'There are relative degrees of the skill sets that people come forward with. If you apply yourself on any subject area, you can improve from where you were, so that you can strengthen your capabilities, including the learning of leadership skills.' But is that enough to make you a leader? 'Even though you've improved from where you were, it may not be significant enough to be considered by others as a leader. That still might not meet the level or threshold in other people's minds as a leader. You might not be seen through their prism as a leader.'

Management training consultant **Barry N. Smith** believes 'some parts are within people and other parts have to be acquired'. Smith says there are three 'connections' that drive leaders – the connection to people, the connection to goals, and the connection to self. He believes the successful leaders find balance among the three connections. And he says that while some have natural aptitude in one or two of the connections, they may need to learn and build experiences in the areas where they have shortcomings. 'Some can't formulate goals – they don't have the experiences where they learned how. Some are natural visionaries and some aren't, and some personal environments don't lean to that aptitude.' Smith firmly believes, however, that some leaders can be trained. 'Some find mastery through themselves. Some find it through the innate. It's a composite. It's a matter of percentages.'

Retired U.S. Army Colonel **Julius Jones** (now a senior consultant for Datatrac Information Services of Richardson, Texas) was more absolute. 'I think



it's learned. I think you can learn the attributes. You can learn the skill sets that you need to be a good leader. The reason I say that is that the key to leadership is an appreciation of people.' Jones says in part it's his definition of leadership that allows him to be so certain. 'We used to say that leadership is the art of gaining wilful compliance from those who are led. You are frequently asking people to do things that they otherwise would not do. Charging up a hill in the face of the enemy is an example. You have to be able to communicate and get those people to do those things they've been trained to do – to band together in a willing manner, and to recognize that some greater good is going to come from that commonality of purpose.'

The leadership training sequence

Jones believes good leadership training is done in a specific sequence. 'I think you have to start with some kind of training about understanding yourself. If you can find out what kind of person you are, then the second part of that will be an understanding of others. It's tapping those things that cause others to motivate themselves.' He continues, 'Then you need some set of courses that lay out how the work gets done, or how you do work through others. That leads into the whole idea of project management, and getting other to serve the project metrics, whatever they are.'

CBC consulting principal, **Carolyn Brown**, a leadership training specialist, also leans toward Jones' view. 'I feel that most of leadership can be learned. I don't feel those most of it is innate.'

Brown believes communication is a critical component. 'There are a number of skills essential to being an effective leader. There's the ability to develop a vision and communicate it to others. The second would be to know how to motivate and inspire. And the third would be the ability to resolve conflicts and negotiate solutions.' She adds that 'if you're



leading in a team setting, obviously team development is an essential skill.'

Which type of training builds leaders?

'I personally feel that training is most effective when it combines the theoretical with the experiential,' says Brown. 'If you only do experiential training like getting lost in the desert, while people have a profound experience during the training itself, without the theoretical grounding they may never be able to actually do anything different in their lives based on that experience.' That doesn't mean she believes theoretical training is any better on its own. 'The same is true when you only have theoretical training. Unless you have some experiential base, it's very hard to go back and apply the training. It's important that people have the opportunity to see the behaviours in action. If you have a theory where you actually see the people in action doing the principles discussed, that's going to be a lot more effective than reading the book.'

Spotting good leadership training goes to the roots of developing any high-quality training. Brown contends: 'You have to do a needs assessment for the leaders you're trying to develop. It goes back to matching their skills. We're teaching middle managers and project managers. We're not going to be teaching them the same skills as you would at the top of the organization. What's required of the CEO is different from what's required of a project manager/leader.' She continues 'When you're evaluating leadership training, you have to ask if the theory is appropriate for these people, if the structure is appropriate, and if the training design appropriate for adult learning.'

So there you have it. It is possible to build on the gene pool. But people will still argue about the degree to which leadership can be taught. And the kinds of leadership skills needed for different roles and for different stages of projects still have to be recognized and applied.

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