



IMPACTFACTORY
More than just training

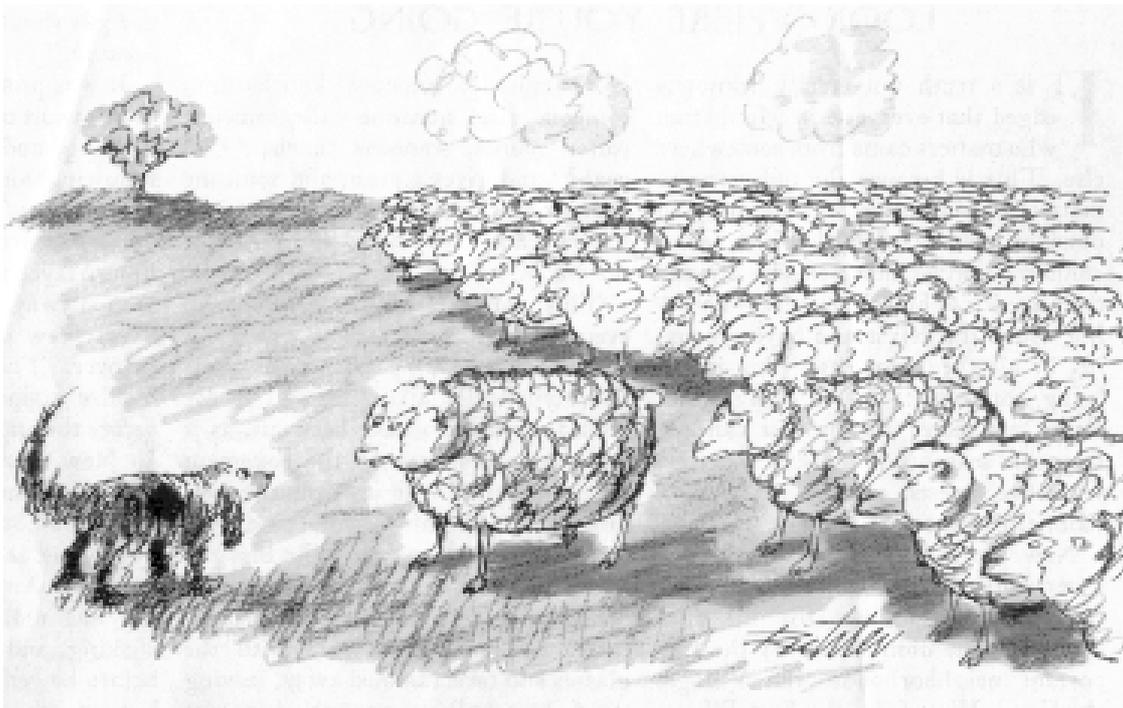
Leadership

Are Leaders born or made?

A view from Impact Factory

Robin Chandler & Jo Ellen Grzyb

Impact Factory Copyright © 2003



“Speaking frankly, a number of us are worried about a serious leadership vacuum.”

© 2003 The New Yorker Collection from cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.

Leadership

Ever since we started Impact Factory, lo these many years ago, we have struggled with the whole notion of leadership. Indeed, we have resisted writing about it in much detail because the subject is so subjective.

Are there natural born leaders? Can you create a leader out of someone who isn't leadership material? And for heaven's sake just exactly is leadership material?

However, we keep getting hired to create leadership programmes of late, so we thought we'd better put a few of our thoughts and ideas down to clarify our perspective on this whole question of leadership.

We hear organisations and companies say they have a leadership void. Or others who feel that if they only had stronger leadership everything would be all right. They obviously expect leaders to have vision and to be able to bring other people along with them – to enrol them in their strategies and plans for the future.

It's understandable; for the most part, people actually do want to be lead. Not necessarily micro-managed, but they want to know that there is someone at the helm who knows what they're doing and will let everyone know what's expected of them.

When the 'vision' word is used it usually means that someone has an idea of what the future could look like and a plan to get there. No point painting rosy, pie in the sky pictures (we'll double our turnover in a year; we'll create international markets; we'll be number one in the UK, etc.) if pie in the sky is all they are.

More like, we could double our turnover in a year, this is how we could get there, this is what I expect from everyone in the organisation to help us get there and any new ideas are welcome.

A leadership void usually means that people don't feel looked after, they don't feel seen and heard and most of all, they don't feel as though there's anyone truly in charge who knows what's going on.

So even if we haven't yet fully dealt with the question of whether leaders are born or can be made, let's look at some of the qualities needed from a leader.

There is one essential quality for anyone in any position of leadership: from running a company to running a church fete to running a home. That quality is the ability to see what is going on.

Yes, there are other qualities that are valuable: good communication, being articulate, the ability to think on your feet, humour, flexibility, integrity, compelling presence, empathy. But if you can't see what is going on, all those good qualities are going to be wasted.

Seeing is clarity. Seeing in the "wood for the trees" kind of way. To be able to see you need a clear understanding of what has made you the way you are and what has shaped and influenced your life. The clearer you are about what motivates and affects your behaviour, the clearer you will be able to see what is going on with other people.

So let's start with you. Here's a little exercise you can do. Make a list of all the people – real or fictional – who you consider role models. People who have inspired you, who get your creative juices going. These can be anyone from parents, friends and teachers to fictional heroes, movie, sport or pop stars, artists, writers, composers, fictional characters, places, paintings, etc.

How difficult did you find even thinking about that? We've asked people on leadership programmes to do that exercise and we are continually surprised when people say they don't have any role models, or they can't think of anyone who influenced their lives. They almost want to give the impression that they sprang from Zeus's head fully formed instead of admitting that many things shaped them over the years. Almost as though admitting that they were influenced is a sign of weakness, not of strength.

So first rule of leadership – you can't do it alone. Any good leader worth their salt should be able to name 100 people, places, things, right off the bat. Why? Because they know themselves well enough to acknowledge who has supported and inspired them along the way, and what support they still need to get things done.

When you look at your list of role models, think about what qualities those people have that are attractive to you, that make them inspiring. Now, putting aside modesty, false or otherwise, think about what qualities they have that you also have. A leader may be humble (a good quality), but modesty can get in the way of being effective. You have to know who you are and accept that you have outstanding qualities – leaders are able to do that.

How well do you understand the rules, beliefs and patterns you have created in your life so far? Everyone's got 'em. They can be the simple kind of rule – you should brush your teeth twice a day. They can be the more complex kind – you should treat everyone the way you expect to be treated (you know, the do unto others type thing).

Beliefs can be things like – I believe everyone should be fair.

And patterns can be as simple as going to and from work the same way every day.

So the next exercise in the how well do you know yourself game is to make a list of all the rules, patterns and beliefs you have. We're not asking you to put a value judgement on whether they are good or bad rules and beliefs; this exercise is just to see how well you know your behaviour.

So second rule of leadership – you need to know what makes you tick.

The reason we're asking you all these questions and having you think about all this stuff, is that even if you don't think of yourself as a leader, you will have areas in your life where other people look to you for leadership. We're asking you to practise thinking like a leader.

Now we can get to the seeing bit we mentioned earlier. This is what we mean when we say that the more you know what motivates and drives you, the more you can 'get out of the way'. We've heard the following phrase from a number of people throughout the years and it's a good one – get your attention off yourself and on to whatever is going on.

Here's what you'll be able to see if you do that: you'll be able to see things from other people's points of view; you'll be able to understand what's going on for them. You'll be able to see the whole picture not just your little bit of it. You'll be able to see what other people are capable of and how to help them achieve it.

Outstanding leadership requires much more than people being really good at their jobs: it requires innovative thinking; it requires people making positive and inspiring impacts; and it requires them to be able to motivate others. What is needed is an ability to think and act 'out of the box'; out of the accepted or 'right' ways of doing things.

Leaders need to be able to identify what the needs of the future are and create a new leadership model, rather than just following the current leadership example. The culture of tomorrow will be one where change and innovation are the order of the day.

Out of the box thinking and identifying future needs go hand in hand. On some of our workshops we run something called a 'creativity workout', which is all about rule-breaking and doing things differently. The real leaders in every group we've run have had no problem breaking rules, creating a bit of anarchy, to see what else might come of it, and trying out new things.

Those who aren't natural leaders tended to get stuck at the same places time and again with the same refrain – I couldn't do that! Their own beliefs and rules about how things should be done got in the way, and they ended up not having quite as much fun either. More importantly, they found they couldn't or wouldn't shift enough of their patterns and rules to be able to 'build a better mousetrap'.

Third rule of leadership – you can't stay stuck.

Indeed, 'can't do' is an alien concept.

That's another thing leaders do – they get things done. They have commitment, persistence, determination and resilience. Couple all of that with creative problem-solving and you have a person things happen around. What we mean, is that no matter what their personality, there will be a kind of buzz around them; things change when they're around; indeed, things might even get shaken up when they're around. It isn't always comfortable being around leaders.

Here's why. Leaders are people who don't usually follow the party line. They have an edge to them, they get up people's noses sometimes, they make decisions – lots of them – that often others don't like. They say the things that need saying in a way that others understand.

They make mistakes.

They don't mind conflict and indeed, sometimes, create it in order to resolve difficulties.

They're not always liked.

They put themselves in the line of fire.

Great leaders don't, nor should they, fit a mould. Try to cram them into one, and they'll burst out or leave.

Expect the unusual, the quirky, the non-conformist, the doer, the inspirer and you've got yourself a leader.

Creating or nurturing Leaders

So back to the question we started with. Can you create a leader out of someone who isn't? Or is just that all leaders are born that way?

There is a tendency, in our Western culture, to see Leadership as synonymous with white, middle class, male, in charge. There's a kind of unspoken template of what leadership is supposed to look like. Now we know that isn't true. Leadership can and does come in many different shapes and forms. Good leaders don't conform to a template.

However, it is important to acknowledge that people developing their leadership skills are often hampered by their picture (or other people's picture) of what a leader is supposed to 'look' like.

This is when it's important to understand that the role of leader is not only completely individual (remember, they don't fit a mould!) but also has to be worked at with belief and will and determination by the person occupying it.

Not only that, leaders will be experienced differently by the individual people they lead. One getting encouragement, another understanding. That, of course, will be due to the leader's ability to see what each person needs.

Also, not every leader is going to be a great leader in the sense that the world around them acknowledges their leader status. Many leaders get no 'public' recognition, only their personal satisfaction of a job well done.

So, to answer the question. In our view, you cannot 'send' someone on a leadership programme that doesn't want to be there and expect them to become a leader. It's not like the reluctant presenter who gets sent along to a course and finds out that it's not so bad after all. If your prospective leader isn't fully engaged in the process, sending them along to be 'taught' leadership skills will be a waste of time and money.

However, when someone has to step into a new leadership role, or there are greater expectations of how they manage people, or they've become a project leader, *and* they show a willingness to develop and take on new skills, then it's really possible to give these people a leadership boost.

Everyone can develop their capacity to lead, from church committees to local pressure groups to business teams to political parties. When someone is committed to, and practises using their leadership capabilities at all levels in their life, *then* they can and will develop their own potential as a leader.

Having said all of that, there are indeed, born leaders. These are the people to whom others look, even from a very early age; they seem willing to be seen and heard, take risks, stand up for what they believe. They do have charisma, people want to hear what they have to say, they want to get things done and bring people along with them. They're happy in the limelight (even if it's an uncomfortable place to be) and they do have 'vision'.

But even born leaders have to hone and work at their leadership skills. It's not something you 'arrive' at and that's it, you're there, a leader. Just like everyone else, to develop you have to practise, practise, practise.

The fourth and final rule of leadership: there are no rules.

We have a link to a sample six-day leadership programme we ran recently which will give you a flavour of how we put this whole approach to leadership into action.

<http://www.impactfactory.com/gate/registered/leadership.pdf>

If you are interested in our approach to Leadership,
or any other Professional Personal Development issues.

Please phone: 020 7226 1877

or e-mail enquiries@impactfactory.com