

Your Turn

by Albert W. Niemi Jr.

Finding the Leaders

Can leadership be taught? My experience suggests that the answer is equivocal. Yes, leadership can be taught—but, no, it can't be taught to everybody or *by* everybody. I've found that not every student can learn to be a leader because not every student possesses the characteristics essential to good leadership.

The fact we, as educators, often forget is that most people in life are followers. True leadership is a relatively rare commodity. Few people ascend to the top and chart their own way. Only a small percentage of students enrolled in top-flight MBA programs will demonstrate strong leadership potential. Those destined to go all the way to the CEO's office are rarer still.

I don't deny that most students benefit from exposure to some leadership training. Even students who never assume upper-level leadership roles may develop more initiative simply by learning more about how true leaders think. But after teaching more than 15,000 students, I have found students without the character traits of leaders don't usually make their way to the top.

With this in mind, we then should ask a different question: If leadership skills can be taught to, and best learned by, those who possess the inherent attributes and characteristics of great leaders, how do we recognize those students? Once we learn to recognize those individ-

uals who demonstrate the ability to separate themselves from the pack early on, we then can offer them selective, advanced programs in leadership to help them hone and strengthen their leadership skills.

Identifying those who will become the leaders of tomorrow isn't that difficult. First and fore-



most, they are the optimists. The people who make it to the top in business are those who always see the good news in their companies; they are the purveyors of hope. If students can't sell hope and optimism to a group, it's going to be difficult, if not impossible, for them to get that group to follow them. I tell our students, "If you're not optimistic, if you can't see the silver lining in the darkest clouds, if your

cup is not at least half-full on the worst day, you're simply not going to make it. No one wants to follow a whiner."

Second, leaders are also workaholics. They give their hearts and souls to their companies. Third, they always are two steps ahead of their colleagues. By staying ahead of the pack, leaders command the respect of their colleagues. Would you want to follow someone who was easy to catch? And finally, great leaders are compassionate and know how to treat people with respect.

In early leadership training courses, we must begin to detect these leadership "vibrations" from our students. In this way, we can identify the positive people from the naysayers. We can see those who are driven to succeed and who command the respect of their peers.

As educators we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that, when it comes to learning to become a good leader, not everyone is going to make it. We can design our programs in leadership so that all students start on a level playing field, learning the nuts and bolts

during the MBA program, including courses in finance, economics, accounting, and statistics. This kit of tools is fundamental to success. But eventually, a leadership program must begin to separate the leaders from the followers. More important, a leadership program must be taught by proven leaders, who are best suited to recognize leadership potential and teach those who possess it.

For example, this past semester at

Cox School of Business, we offered an eight-week “Seminar for Emerging Leaders,” taught by Roger Enrico, former CEO and chairman of PepsiCo. The seminar was adapted for MBA students from his “change leadership” seminars used to train select, senior managers at PepsiCo.

During his time with the company, Enrico learned that whenever PepsiCo experienced difficulty moving to a new growth platform, it was often not because there weren’t good strategies in place to implement change. The problem was that the strategies never got adequate traction or implementation—and the more difficult the change, the more difficult it was to get traction.

He began analyzing the process of change leadership. He learned how to generate enthusiasm and passion about a new course of action for an enterprise or a new organization. At the end of the day, leadership is about the ability to create change—to make people see things in a different light. From this, he developed the process for leading change he now teaches in his seminars.

But could Enrico create change if he could not first inspire confidence and respect among his employees? Probably not. Enrico himself didn’t begin teaching leadership techniques until the twilight of his career, after he not only had established himself as a proven leader, but also had discovered the character traits a leader requires. When Enrico came to Cox, he wanted to handpick a select group of students and teach them advanced leadership principles through in-depth, one-on-one sessions. With the help of our faculty and staff, he identified nine outstanding Cox students with high leadership potential.

If he had aimed his seminars at all students, many of them might have been overwhelmed, frustrated, or even bored as they tried to learn skills for which they weren’t suited. However, because Enrico targeted students who possessed leadership traits, the course was a success and one our students will never forget.

It takes work and diligence to invest in leadership training. Unfortunately, too many business schools provide students with only the basic tool kit and basic leadership courses. Others teach leadership skills but do so indiscriminately,

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without differentiating between those students with leadership potential and those without. In either case, business schools often aren’t training leaders. Rather, the schools are merely teaching followers skills they’ll never use.

At Cox, we take pains to pinpoint the leaders in our ranks. We require *all* of our students to complete 30 hours of training in our Business Leadership Center. After that, we offer specialized courses in leadership training—and it’s in these courses that the natural leaders emerge. We don’t use our traditional faculty when teaching leadership,

because so few professors have led companies—most have only studied them. Instead, we utilize more than 40 executives like Roger Enrico who have significant corporate leadership experience. As a result, they are first-class role models for our students to emulate and are eminently qualified to know true leadership skills when they see them.

While there are certain innate characteristics that must be present for a great leader to emerge, those characteristics alone cannot sustain a leader. Effective leaders must continue to learn. I am in my 22nd year as a dean of a business school, and I’ve been at SMU Cox a little more than six years. Yet, I’ve learned more in the last six years about leadership by watching great people and establishing mentors than in the rest of my career. My advice to anyone, even if they are in the twilight of their careers, is that it is never too late to learn.

Even when we identify students with the optimism, drive, and presence to be leaders, we must send the message that potential alone does not make a leader. Students must understand that, despite their talents, they will fail as leaders if they do not continue to seek opportunities to learn and improve their skills. They must know that they can always get better, at any stage of their careers, by learning skills from the leaders around them, those people everyone wants to follow. They must then examine leadership another way—by looking at those no one wants to follow and understanding why they don’t. **Z**

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