

What Makes Leaders GREAT

Many educators are finding that developing great leaders isn't about teaching skill sets. It's about helping students adopt the essential behaviors that all great leaders share.

by **Tricia Bisoux** illustration by José Ortega

Those who study leadership have spent years asking the difficult questions: Can leadership be taught? Can it be learned? One look at the number of new leadership-based centers and programs cropping up at schools worldwide makes it seem as if they've found their answers. And yet, even as business educators design leadership courses, many seem uncomfortable with the idea of "teaching leadership." Teaching implies the delivery of knowledge from one person to another; where leadership is concerned, they say, students must often discover that knowledge for themselves.

According to business educators, the deeper they delve into what makes great leaders, the more they realize that true leadership cannot be transmitted to students as a neat bundle of skills or delivered via a series of guest lecturers and discussions. So says Terry Pearce, author of *Leading Out Loud* and instructor at the Haas School of Business at the University of California at Berkeley and the London School of Business. True leadership, he emphasizes, must be experienced, not taught.



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“Leadership starts with self-confidence, courage, and perspective. You can’t teach those traits. Students must experience them,” says Pearce. “Business schools that look at leadership only as a set of academic skills will find themselves producing clones who don’t have it in them to lead.”

Paula Hill Strasser, director of the Business Leadership Center at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, points out that the job of a business school isn’t necessarily to teach leadership. “We don’t believe leaders are born, but that people are born with different potentials to lead,” she says. “Leadership can’t be taught, but it can be learned through facilitation, simulation, and one-on-one coaching. It’s a process of self-discovery.”

The goal for many schools, say Strasser and other leadership faculty, is to create highly personal experiences that help students discover who they are, what they believe, and how their actions affect others. Each experience is carefully designed to help students develop the behaviors required to discover how—and if—they can lead the way.

LEADERSHIP’S “TOP 10”

As business schools parse the myriad elements of leadership, one thing has become clear: Leadership is an intensely personal business. Business schools have the difficult task of creating experiences and reflective journeys to leadership that often will differ from student to student. “For students, it’s like the old mythology of the search for the Holy Grail,” says Pearce. “If you’re in the forest and see footprints, you’re on the wrong path.”

Leaders often follow such incredibly different paths and take such drastically different approaches that it’s difficult to pinpoint the common traits that make them effective. Educators have found, however, that excellent leaders share a set of distinct behaviors and characteristics, which students must possess if they, too, wish to lead.



1 SELF-AWARENESS

First and foremost, great leaders must know who they are, says Peter Alduino, leadership development consultant and president of Bridge Group Communications in San Francisco, California. Alduino requires each of his students to ask themselves two impor-

tant questions: Who am I at this moment? What do I want? “Most people go through their whole lives without asking or answering either one of these questions,” says Alduino. “By the end of the course, I hope participants will hold these questions in the palms of their hands and re-examine them on a daily basis.”

Noted author Warren Bennis, professor of business administration and founding chairman of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business in Los Angeles, wants his students to ask two more pressing questions: Do I really want to lead? Am I willing to make the sacrifices leaders must make? To help them find the answers, the Marshall School not only brings in guest speakers, but also requires each student to shadow a leader over the entire semester. Students observe, measure, interview, and take pictures of that leader, while exploring the issues and challenges of leadership.

“We confront them and help them evaluate their own leadership and solve their own leadership problems in small groups. They engage in a great deal of self-reflection,” says Bennis. “We’ve found that there’s no difference between being a really effective leader and becoming a fully integrated person. Unless students know what their strengths and weaknesses are, and what their characters are like, I don’t think they can ever really deploy their full talents.”

2 PERSONAL CONVICTION

Self-awareness is key; but leadership stems not just from who people are, but from what they believe, says Kembrel Jones, who is associate dean of full-time MBA programs at Emory University’s Goizueta Business School in Atlanta. With this in mind, Goizueta recently revamped its curriculum to create its MBA Leadership Program. The program’s mission is to develop principled leaders who know, and follow, their own convictions.

“We are focused on values-based leadership. The word ‘values’ may evoke ethics, but it’s more than that for us,” says Jones. Goizueta has based its new leadership program on a set of seven core values: courage, integrity, accountability, rigor, diversity, team, and community. “These are the values that our students and faculty live by,” explains Jones. “They permeate everything we do in the program.”



Call for Research on Multicultural Leadership

Leadership consultant and author Terry Pearce and former Charles Schwab CEO David Pottruck would like to see more research on what it takes to lead people who live in different countries and follow different practices and beliefs. To that end, they have developed the Initiative for Multicultural Leadership, which is offering grants to academics around the world who are interested in this area of study.

Pearce is looking for elements of “common mythology”—the common myths, stories, and legends—that inspire people, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. “As we begin to adapt ourselves as leaders and develop others as leaders, we can help them understand the common threads that peo-

ple around the world share,” says Pearce. Once organizational leaders better understand the commonalities among ethnically diverse individuals, he adds, they can lead multicultural groups more effectively.

The research generated by the grant program will help the initiative achieve its main goal, which is “to create, within ten years, a core group of leaders in leveraged institutions who can inspire people from every culture and country by kindling common themes that create meaning for virtually everyone.”

Academics interested in more information about the Initiative for Multicultural Leadership, as well as its grant program and its requirements, can visit www.terrypearce.com or contact Pearce at terry@terrypearce.com.



3 COURAGE

Because great leaders will always face resistance to change, they must have the courage to act on their beliefs no matter what the circumstance, says Alduino. “Students must ask, ‘Do I have the courage to lead this charge despite resistance?’

They must ask, ‘Do I have the courage to have my beliefs questioned?’”

4 CREATIVITY

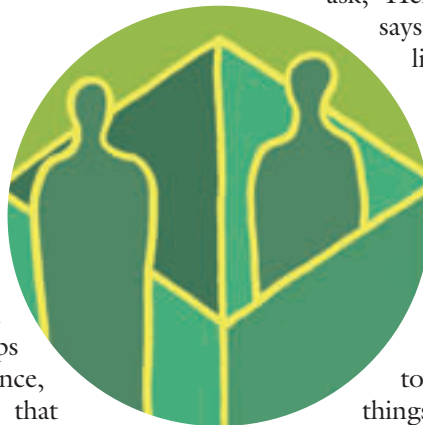
Today’s business schools are selling not only their graduates’ functional skills, but also their creativity and ability to think on their feet, says Jones. Business schools must provide students with experiences that test their creative limits, whether in simulations or on military training courses. For example, second-year students in Goizueta’s MBA Leadership Program participate in a capstone leadership experience at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia. During their experience, students are pushed to solve life-and-death problems that require split-second thinking and on-the-spot creativity.

Paddy Miller, professor of leadership at IESE in Barcelona, Spain, points to an example cited in “Battle Lessons,” an article by Dan Baum, which was published in the January 17, 2005, issue of *The New Yorker*. The article, which explores the lessons the military is learning about leadership, describes the actions taken by Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes during an incident in Iraq. To dispel an angry

mob, the article notes, U.S. soldiers are trained to fire warning shots in the air. Yet, when Hughes and his team were confronted by an enraged crowd of Iraqis in Baghdad, Hughes instead ordered his men to kneel down and point their rifles at the ground. The once-angry crowd quieted immediately. Hughes had not learned that approach in his training; instead, he thought of a different, more effective way to solve a very immediate problem.

“Military leaders must be hands-on, and their decisions are often environmentally driven. They constantly have to ask, ‘Here I am. What do I do now?’”

says Miller. Miller emphasizes that, like Hughes, students must be able to imagine more effective solutions than those they have already been taught to truly lead effectively.



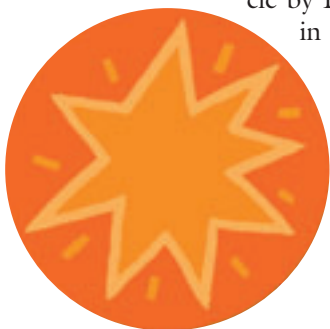
5 CURIOSITY

Great leaders have an inherent curiosity that drives them to ask questions and try new things, just to see what happens.

“Leadership requires regularly thinking of the questions that affect the world we live in,” says Alduino. “Only by asking those questions can we have the opportunity to make a difference in the world and create something that is fundamentally better than what is already there.”

6 ABILITY TO INSPIRE

On the first day of class, Pearce routinely asks students two questions: When were you last inspired? Why was it inspirational for you? Such discussion helps students find, explore, and activate their own abilities to inspire and earn the trust of



others. “Students must get a sense of themselves as inspirers who can generate change and move others to act,” says Pearce. “When you look at leaders who have changed the world, they have some kind of internal spirit that has led them to do it. That capability resides in every one of us.”



7 ABILITY TO LISTEN

When people think of leaders, they may think of individuals who can talk a good game. In fact, communication and presentation skills have become a hot ticket at many business schools. But great leaders often do their best when they stop communicating and start listening. To that end, developing listening skills has also become a priority at

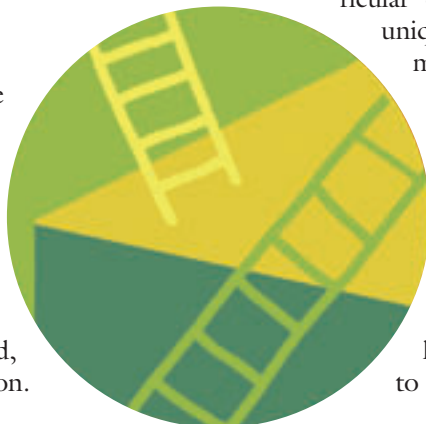
Goizueta for both faculty and students.

“Faculty involved in our program are going through leadership coaching training,” says Jones. “We work on our listening skills so that we can hear what students are saying, know where they’re running into problems, and be able to talk them through it.” Improvisation exercises help participants—including Jones himself—hone their listening abilities.

“I teach the communications course; but in taking this training, I realized that I don’t listen that well!” says Jones. “By learning to listen, I’m becoming a better leader, a better problem solver. We discuss that with students. Many of the biggest problems they’ll face won’t be about a financial calculation. Their biggest problems will be about people.”

8 ABILITY TO INNOVATE

It has been said that the difference between management and leadership is the difference between keeping the status quo and innovating to drive change. The business programs that fail to teach leadership are those that focus on managing skills, says Miller of IESE. Those who succeed, he believes, will focus on innovation.



“Students often don’t have sufficient innovative abilities,” says Miller. “They need to know not just how to lead, but how to drive change in an organization and convince an entire organization to do things differently. We’re often not good at teaching that particular skill.”

9 & 10 EAGERNESS TO EXPERIENCE AND WILLINGNESS TO REFLECT

When it comes to leadership, says Jones of Goizueta, students don’t “learn by doing.” They learn by doing and then reflecting on what they’ve done. In fact, the first year that Goizueta’s new MBA Leadership Program was in place, faculty and students didn’t take enough time to reflect, Jones says. As a result, the program suffered. Now, debriefing and reflection is an essential portion of the curriculum.

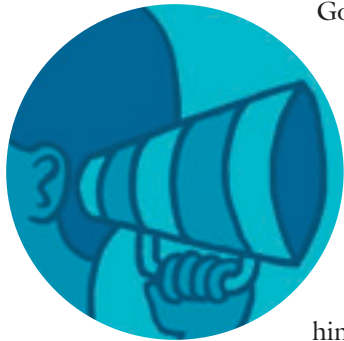
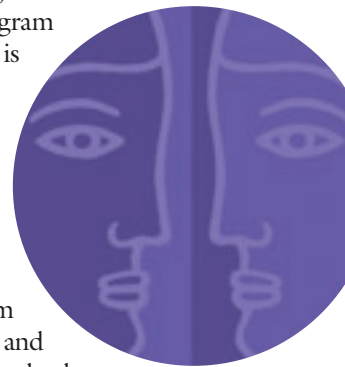
“Everyone must understand how important it is to take time to reflect on an experience,” Jones comments. “People have their ‘aha’ moments during times of reflection, not when they’re going 90 miles an hour.”

Only by participating in a curriculum that relies on experience, discussion, and reflection can students develop their own leadership potential, agrees Martha Maznevski, professor and director for the Strategic Leadership for Women program at IMD in Lausanne, Switzerland. “We rely a great deal on structured discussion and reflection on experiences,” says Maznevski. “We find that students must reflect on their experiences, develop generalizations from that experience, and move that forward into new experiences to truly develop as leaders.”

The Hardest Soft Skill

It may be a tough order for business schools to make the curricular changes necessary to help students develop these unique and often ineffable behaviors. In fact, leadership may be the hardest “soft” skill for business schools or students to tackle, says Jones. “We know leadership is difficult because of the leadership void we see in business right now,” he says. “If the elements of leadership were easy—knowing yourself, understanding your values, identifying your leadership style—we wouldn’t be seeing the problems we see today.”

Miller of IESE often shows his students these hard-to-define nuances of leadership by taking them to an orchestra’s rehearsal to watch how a conductor



Pumping the Leadership Pipeline

Many companies have developed their own comprehensive, in-house, leadership training programs, which will ensure them a homegrown supply of leaders. As a result, some business schools are looking to corporate leadership programs as models for their own.

BizEd spoke to Dennis Donovan, executive vice president of human resources for Atlanta-based Home Depot. Donovan oversees the company's 325,000 employees and helped design the company's three formal leadership training programs. The company's two-year Store Leadership Program (SLP) trains store managers, and its 12-week Future Leaders Program (FLP) is aimed at college seniors and graduate students. Both were launched in 2002. The best and brightest students from the FLP are then invited to attend Home Depot's intense two-year Business Leadership Program (BLP), which has been in place since 1998. Together, these three programs train hundreds of individuals a year.

The key for Home Depot, Donovan explains, is not just to find the best talent. The company also wants to ensure, through these programs, that it develops and retains talent with exactly the leadership skills it requires.

Why did the Home Depot find it necessary to start the SLP, FLP, and BLP?

To fill leadership positions, we first promote our best people; second, we look for experienced retailers. But we wanted to create a third option and create what we call "pipeline programs." That way, we know we have a continuous pipeline of the best talent.

What leadership skills are taught in these programs?

We focus on three basic planning processes in the company: strategic, operational, and HR. We then look at what we call

the "leadership essentials." These refer to what we have identified as the behaviors of high-performing leaders: They drive and deliver results, excel in customer service, inspire achievement, build relationships, create inclusion, and live integrity. We also use 360-degree feedback with every officer of the company to ensure that leadership will be covered on all fronts.

Eighty percent of students in the BLP are at master's level, and most are mid-program MBAs. What is lacking in MBAs coming out of business school that your training program addresses?

At one time, the BLP was actually a program for undergraduates, but we decided to weight it more toward those at the MBA or master's level. We wanted to stimulate their motivation and supplement their knowledge by giving them more exposure to our organization and building on the experience base they already have. The BLP, SLP, and FLP are pipelines that help us identify good people and accelerate their growth in the company.

What would you like to see more of from graduates of b-school based leadership programs?

I'd like to see business schools focus more on helping students understand how to drive large-scale change in organizations. Too many people have the best strategic plan in the world, or have gone to the eighth layer of an operating plan, but can't bring about competitive advantage in their organizations. They can't drive systematic change on a sustained basis.

The best CEOs are those who bring about successful change. Business schools that focus on this aspect of leadership will help catapult their students into success in business. I think a number of schools seem to be onto this, but a number of them aren't.

works with musicians. There, he says, they see a metaphor for business leadership in action. Although a conductor may be a good musician, he never touches an instrument, Miller explains. He must trust each individual performer to play his part well. And while each performer's score shows only what he or she must play, the conductor's score includes every part and shows the entire piece in all its complexities.

The ability to direct the whole, even while inspiring the individual, is at the heart of leadership, says Miller. In addition, Miller notes that even though different orchestras may be playing the same music, no two performances of that music sound exactly alike. "Every conductor has a unique passion and vision," says Miller. "If students get that, it's inspirational."

By emphasizing active experiences over passive discussion, behavioral change over functional skill sets, and reflection and

self-discovery over test grades, many educators believe they're on the right track to creating a generation of truly inspired and inspirational leaders. "I've been teaching a course in leadership for the last ten years," says Bennis. "It's only been this year that I can say with confidence, not that we can teach leadership, but that we can create the right conditions in the classroom so that students can learn leadership. I'm now certain that we've got it right."

As educators develop a new understanding of leadership, they may render moot the old questions of whether leadership can be taught or learned. It could be that leadership can only be discovered. Business schools can aid the process by providing experiences that spark that discovery. Whether or not students emerge from those experiences as great leaders, says educators, is completely up to them. **Z**