Is leadership a skill that can be taught or is it an innate ability that only a few can possess?
Please use examples to support your answer.

"Some are born leaders, some achieve leadership, and some have leadership thrust upon them. Which of these are you, or would you rather not bother?" — Maurice Flanagan

Introduction

Organisational leadership has established itself over the decades as a prominent topic in scientific research (Thierry *et al.*, 1997). This can largely be attributed to the importance that the presence of effective leaders exerts on business success in today's dynamic and competitive market environment (Elmuti, Minnis and Abebe, 2005). Although there are several influential theories regarding 'innate' vs 'developed' leadership, this is still one of the most studied and debated topics in management (Zornada, 2005). It is imperative for an organisation's success to take a decisive view on the question of whether leaders are born or made (Ruvolo, Peterson and LeBoeuf, 2004; Henrikson, 2006) and implement the appropriate recruitment or training and development initiatives. This essay is going to provide an informed view on this question by introducing a definition of leadership and then differentiating it from management. Supporting evidence will then be presented in favour of each side of the argument working toward a more integrated and balanced view. A reality check looking at prevailing behaviours on an organisational and social level supported with examples would be used to give weight to the argument. Finally, a suggested model for leadership identification and development will be presented.

Definition

It is essential to start with a working definition of 'leadership' in order to explore the concept in light of the posed question. Some sources define the concept rather simply by focusing on what leadership is or on what leaders do (Summerfield, 2014). On the other hand, there is a more integrated and complex, page-long definition based on more than 160 articles and considering 90 different dimensions (Winston and Patterson, 2006). Here is a simple and practical definition that enables an exploration of the dimensions of leadership – "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute towards the effectiveness and success of the organisation of which they are members" (Koopman et al., 1999, p.507)

Management vs Leadership

Furthermore, to effectively address the question that this essay explores, it is also important to distinguish between management and leadership. Differences between these two concepts can be identified along the lines of providing direction, alignment, outcomes, motivation and time orientation (Daft, 2014). Understanding these is crucial for determining whether leaders are born or made.

Table 1 – Management vs Leadership

	Management	Leadership
Direction	Planning, ordering results	Creating vision and strategies
Alignment	Organising, staffing	Communicating, vision and values
Outcomes	Stability, order, predictability	Creating and managing change
Motivation	Controlling, solving problems	Inspiring, motivating
Time orientation	Present	Future

Source: Adapted from Daft (2014)

Leadership 'genetics'

The Great Man leadership theory, popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suggests that leadership qualities are inherited and particular to the upper class (Kirkpatick and Locke, 1991). Although this theory has been disputed and is nowadays considered somewhat politically incorrect, it still has current proponents. Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy and Douglas MacArthur are often given as examples of great men connecting their innate abilities with appropriate situations (Organ, 1996). Leadership theory then progressed recognising that rather than looking for natural or in-born fixed characteristic it is more reasonable to look for traits that can predict future leadership ability (Nawaz and Khan, 2016). 'Traits' in this context are consistent and stable behavioural patterns that change little, if at all, based on the situation (Zaccaro, Dubrow and Kolze, 2018). A survey of the literature indicates that there is a general agreement that these traits include honesty or integrity, drive, motivation, self-confidence and intelligence (Kirkpatick and Locke, 1991; Locke, 1999; Kotter, 2008; Robbins *et al.*, 2013). In summary, there are foundational qualities indicating that a person has the potential to be an effective leader that can partially be attributed to heredity and innateness.

Leadership development

It has been pointed out that approximately one-third of the traits leaders possess can be seen as hereditary (Kotter, 2008), therefore it is reasonable to assume that the remaining two-thirds can be viewed as a skill subject to improvement and cultivation. Previously mentioned traits such as motivation and drive seem somewhat difficult to learn. Intelligence, self-confidence and integrity, on the other hand, can be cultivated through relevant experience and appropriate training. Additionally, leadership effectiveness depends not only on traits but also on behaviours, situational awareness and acquired skills (Zeng, Chen and Zeng, 2013). Furthermore, long-term leadership relevance cannot be maintained without continuous learning and development given the pace of economic and technological change (Elmuti, Minnis and Abebe, 2005). Coming up with examples of self-taught leaders that can reliably control for the role of their inherent qualities is rather difficult, if not impossible. It can always be argued that a person drawn to leadership development practices or programmes, more than likely, carries some of the innate characteristics that propel them in this direction. To sum up, the bigger part of the variety in demonstrable leadership competence can be attributed to factors that are not fixed and can be developed in one way or another.

Beyond the dichotomy

So far, this essay established that an adequate and complete view of leadership by necessity would incorporate a fixed or innate as well as a variable or skill-based component. This is a basis for transcending the either/or dichotomy implied by the question in the title of the essay. Applying this insight in practice may mean that a basic form of personality testing or screening is used to identify candidates with suitable innate characteristics from a given talent pool. Then an appropriate combination of formal training, self-learning and on-the-job experiences are implemented to further develop their leadership ability.

Trial and error as a means of adapting and a path toward innovation (Allio, 2005), learning from failure (Ruvolo, Peterson and LeBoeuf, 2004), and emulating the example of successful colleagues (Kotter, 2008) are prime examples of on-the-job leadership development. Valuable skills such as persuasive presentation and effective communication can be learnt through formal training (Doh, 2003), while strategic thinking and visionary leadership can be cultivated through case studies and role-play (Rowe, 2001). Studying others' successes and failures can enable one to see their own experiences in a new light and from alternative perspectives (Flower and Friedman, 1998). Individually, these are

examples of different ways of developing leadership, while collectively they provide evidence for the view of leadership as a dynamic skill.

A reality check

It is helpful to check the views and their implications established by the essay so far against observable human behaviour. On the one hand, political landscapes throughout history have been dominated by hereditary leadership (Besley and Reynal-Querol, 2017). Furthermore, hereditary transitions are common and have scientifically validated models in small and medium-sized businesses as well (Stavrou, Kleanthous and Anastasiou, 2005). These examples can be seen as real-life evidence in favour of the innateness view of leadership ability. On the other hand, literature is abundant with studies that demonstrate multiple leadership development (LD) discourses and practices implemented in organisations of various sizes (Mabey, 2013). These can be seen as evidence of people and populations enacting the view that leadership is a trainable skill that can be developed.

Limitations and future research

Provided a more liberal word count limit, a more in-depth survey of existing leadership theories as presented by (Nawaz and Khan, 2016) would have illuminated the discussion further. Additionally, due to limitations in the scope of this essay no primary research was conducted, which would have not only enriched the discussion but would have contributed to academic research in general.

Suitable directions for future exploration may include interviewing recognised leaders and identifying their views on the topic. Additionally, a relationship worth exploring is how an individual's beliefs about leadership influence their ability to increase their competence in this area.

Conclusion and implications

The study of leadership rightfully commands a large interest from academics and practitioners because effective leadership skills are a requirement for building and guiding successful organisations regardless of their size. This essay started its exploration of the question of whether leadership is an innate ability or a skill that can be developed by first defining the key concept and then differentiating it from 'management'. It then presented theories and examples supporting the assertion that, at least partly, leadership possesses innate or hereditary characteristics. This was balanced by evidence demonstrating that a significant component of leadership effectiveness is composed of trainable abilities and therefore can be seen as a skill. This allows the assumed either/or dichotomy to be transcended to arrive at a more enlightened and balanced view. A good leader is the result of the combination of continuous learning on top of innateness. Leadership itself can be said to be 'both an art and a craft' (Flower and Friedman, 1998). Contextualising these insights into the real world reveals that there are still examples of behaviours indicating support for both sides of the argument.

The view of leadership as a combination of innate abilities and trainable skills has important practical implications. When it comes to recruitment and talent selection, screening may focus on identifying traits indicative of leadership potential. Coaching, training and development, on the other hand, may focus on deploying the most effective strategies for growing the leadership abilities of the selected individuals. In an educational setting, these insights can be used to inform curriculum development with the view of blending learning experiences that most effectively develop leadership skills. A multi-stage model (Figure1) can be developed that incorporates these insights into a practical framework for identifying and then developing future leaders. In conclusion, Rob Sheedan provides a balanced and

straightforward answer to the question addressed in this essay – "People can definitely develop good leadership capabilities. To a certain degree, we all have innate traits that make us good bosses. All you really have to do is work to develop those traits to their utmost."

Figure 1 - Multi-stage leadership selection and growth model

Stage 1 – Selection	Stage 2 – Foundation	Stage 3 – Advanced	Stage 4 – Practical
Screen talent for innate leadership skills Use survey, interviews, practical exercises, feedback from peers and superiors	Build fundamental skills: IT, job-specific, writing, business etiquette, presentation skills	Build interpersonal skills: Communication, negotiation, emotional intelligence, conflict management Build conceptual skills: strategic planning, quality control, change management, global orientation, organisational leadership	Provide support for translating training and insight into embodied practice: secondments and assignment, mentoring, coaching, special projects

Source: Expanded and adapted from Elmuti et al. (2005)

Wordcount (excluding tables and figures): 1,617

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