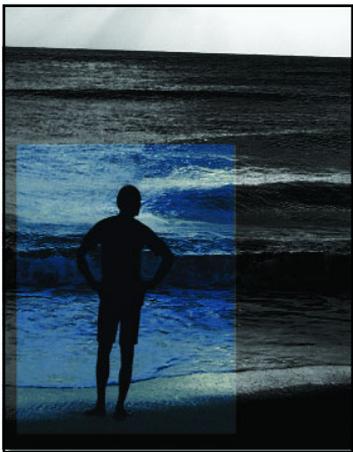


Chapter

2

Learning to be a Leader



D. Quinn Mills

**Leadership
How to Lead, How to Live**

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Chapter 2

Learning to Be a Leader

The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born, that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people simply either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born.

- Warren Bennis, management thinker

Leadership: How to Lead, How to Live

In the first chapter we saw how important leadership is and we identified both what it is, and what it is not. In this chapter we see that each of us can become a leader, if we want to enough, and that there are a number of ways leadership emerges. Finally, we will consider some of the obstacles to leadership and how to overcome them.



Leadership: Innate, Bestowed, or Learned

Many people think leadership is innate. They believe its only source is natural charisma—a term that connotes charm, a winning personality, appeal, and allure. They believe that a good leader *must* possess charisma of some kind and that he or she knows when and how to apply the personal magnetism that is the essence of charisma. Charisma is so tied up with leadership in the minds of many people that we have to include it as both a basis for leadership and a quality of leaders.

Charisma is a subtle and complex quality that takes different forms in different human societies. It is not the same thing in America as it is in East Asia; nor the same as it is in the Muslim world. In America charisma is a combination of appearance, style, focus, confidence, and drive. Charismatic people have great influence on others. They have the capability to energize, inspire, and encourage people to be and act their best. If a leader is not charismatic, then no matter how intelligent he is or what a wonderful administrator he is, he will not be able to inspire his organization to follow him and execute his vision, and therefore he will never be an effective leader.

On the other hand, even if a leader is not the best administrator, or even if she is not the most clever person, if she is charismatic, then she will be able to recruit outstanding people to follow her, and she'll inspire them to perform at the highest level of their ability. Charisma also enables a leader to better interact with and influence the wide variety of people who have an impact on his or her organization, including shareholders, creditors, analysts, journalists, and political figures.

As noted earlier, some people have a natural charisma; but for other aspiring leaders it is the most difficult quality to acquire. Many people think that a person must have an attractive or alluring personality in order to become a leader.

It is true, of course, that people with natural charisma are more readily accepted by others as leaders; but it is not crucial to possess natural charisma to become a leader. There are numerous examples throughout history of people who were not naturally charismatic yet became great leaders. Indeed, there are numerous examples of people today who lack innate charisma but have become effective leaders. We'll see some examples below.

It is also true that people look for leadership in those who occupy positions of authority. Many believe that leadership is bestowed—that it comes with a position of authority.

But a person can be in a position of authority without being an effective leader. Those of us who've worked in large organizations (corporate, governmental, or not-for-profit) often have seen people in high positions—positions of authority—who do not fit our definition of leadership. They are primarily administrators but not leaders. How do they reach the top of organizations without being leaders?

There are several ways. They may be promoted by seniority into positions that require leadership skills, although they lack them. They may use political skills and cunning to reach high positions in which their lack of leadership skills becomes unfortunately apparent. They may be able to exercise leadership at lower-level positions, but become paralyzed by the greater responsibilities at higher levels and retreat into administrative behavior.

It follows that leadership is not limited to the naturally charismatic, nor is it limited to those who are selected for a position of authority. Furthermore, people who have charisma are not always leaders, as we've seen; and those who have high positions aren't always leaders either.

Can those of us without natural charisma become leaders? Can those of us who are not yet in high positions of authority exercise leadership? The answer to both questions is yes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2-1

HOW LEADERS EMERGE

Leadership emerges in some people because they:

- Seem to have it naturally—it is innate.
- Are expected to show it in their jobs—it is bestowed on them.
- Have learned how to be effective leaders.



Many of us have little or no natural charisma. Are we therefore prevented from being leaders? Many of us will have to work our way to positions of authority; they will not be bestowed on us easily. Are we therefore prevented from exercising leadership? The answer depends on whether or not leadership can be learned.

Later in this book (in Part 3) we will examine how leadership and career progress can combine to take a person to positions of authority in which the scope for his or her leadership is greatly enlarged. For the moment, however, we want to

investigate the interaction between natural charisma and effective leadership.

The Personal Challenge of Leadership

Leadership usually requires us to interact to some substantial degree with others. We may have to speak at large gatherings, meet with people we haven't previously known and yet persuade them on a course of action, and huddle frequently with people who work for us. Leadership is rarely exercised in privacy. It is almost always an interpersonal matter.

Some of us are extroverts who find the interpersonal aspect of leadership engaging. Others are introverts, who find the interpersonal aspect of leadership daunting. Some of us lie in the middle of the psychological spectrum, a little extroverted and a little introverted. We aren't sure how we feel about undertaking leadership ourselves.

It would be unfortunate to let the lack of having an extroverted personality serve as a major barrier to our becoming leaders. It would limit our career options and deprive our communities and companies of much that we have to offer.

Can We Learn to be Leaders?

What if we are never able to become quite psychologically comfortable with the interpersonal aspect of leadership? Can I learn to put on a display of confidence that impresses people with my leadership ability? If I do so, am I acting? Is acting like a leader when I don't really feel comfortable dealing with others unethical? Shouldn't people accept me for what I am rather than what I pretend to be? Shouldn't others recognize the leader who is concealed beneath my shy exterior?

If I do act the extrovert, does it mean that I'm not a real leader, but only pretending? Will others sense artificiality in me, to the extent that I lose my credibility with them? Isn't it true, or shouldn't it be true, that real leadership exists when one is strong enough to reveal chinks in his or her armor honestly—because after all, we are all human? Isn't leadership something we should strive toward naturally and honestly?

Admirable as such sentiments are, they may be unduly idealistic. Because of the importance of personal interactions in leadership (see Chapter 3), some business leaders define leadership as primarily the ability to energize others. But to argue that a leader must be naturally and honestly extroverted is rather limiting. Many of us are not naturally extroverted; in fact, many top political and business leaders are not “naturals” at all, but instead have learned to lead as if they are playing one of the most important roles in life.

Leadership as a Role in Life

It's helpful to think of the role of leadership as a mission, rather than as acting or pretending. Like some other important roles in life, we can choose or reject it, just as we can choose or reject being a spouse or parent. Each of us can decide to accept the role of leader, and achieve it if we make the necessary effort. Deciding to be a leader may come with personal costs, risks, and sacrifices. Real leadership is not a romantic exercise in ego satisfaction, but a choice we should make soberly and with recognition of what it may entail. But it is something almost any of us can decide to pursue.

When we think of leadership as a role, we must be careful not to lose sight of the importance of honesty, character, and personal commitment and not to infer that there is a successful recipe for being a good leader. If one approaches leadership in

a formulaic way, then others will sense artificiality and not be inclined to follow. If one sees leadership as a role to play merely in the acting or pretending sense, then he or she will not inspire others to follow because they are very likely to see through the act.

Evidence suggests that for many successful leaders, leadership is a role they have learned. Certainly for some people leadership comes naturally; but others can learn it; and still others overcome handicaps to display it. Many of the most effective leaders in business and public life have been introverts.

President George W. Bush, for example, appeared to people who knew him as a boy and a young man to be very shy; he has had to master reticence to be a leader. Václav Havel, the first president of the Czech Republic after it emerged in the early 1990s from Communist domination, was a quiet writer who never imagined that he would become a political leader.

Each of us has weaknesses; part of being able to lead is finding ways to overcome those weaknesses. Most of us have insecurities, and it takes a lot of effort and resolve to overcome them. It is okay for an emerging leader to have weaknesses as long as he or she recognizes and works hard to overcome them.

What does it mean to say that leadership is a role? It doesn't mean that all leaders are actors, pretending to be someone else as movie actors do. It's possible to play a role without pretending. For example, in a family, both parents have roles to play, but ordinarily they are not pretending in their roles. Similarly, a leader is playing a role, but not pretending. In playing a role, the leader is fulfilling expectations that other

people have of him or her. In the case of leaders, that expectation is for what we call leadership.

Octavian was a nephew of Julius Caesar; he ultimately became the first emperor of Rome. He took the title Augustus and established the empire's first dynasty. He put an end to decades of civil war and expanded the empire to nearly its greatest size. He was a great leader.

What did he think of his leadership?

On his deathbed he said to his family, "If I have played my role well, then dismiss me from the stage with applause."

Here was one of history's outstanding leaders explicitly describing his leadership as a role.

It is important to recognize that people respond to the role, not to the person; just as they respond in a movie theater to the role an actor is playing rather than to the actor behind the role. Thus, when we act like leaders, other people often accept us in that role. It's the role one is playing to which others respond, not to oneself as an individual. This is why leaders come in so many different shapes, sizes, and ages.

Consider this: We each play several roles in our own lives (child, parent, breadwinner, ballplayer, musical performer), and we do so effectively. We can then add leadership to our list of roles.

It is useful to think of leadership as a role even for those who come naturally to leadership. Even a natural leader must be aware that she or he is "leading." Thinking of leadership as a role you are filling makes you recognize that you have a responsibility to the people you are leading. This is very

important. Many people who have exercised leadership for the wrong purposes did so because they did not recognize their responsibility to those they were leading, but saw leadership only as a personal matter—as, if you will, an ego trip.

It is also useful to think of leadership as a role because it enables one to reach for a higher level of performance as a leader. If I am a leader but want to become a better leader, I can mentally put myself out of my comfort zone by playing the role of the better leader in order to improve myself.

A secretary of state of the United States visited with friends one night in a hotel room before giving a speech to a large audience. In that room, among people he'd known for many years, he was relaxed, joking—one of the guys. Then an aide to the secretary stuck his head into the room and said, "Mr. Secretary, you're on in three minutes." Immediately, with a hint of regret, the cabinet officer straightened himself; his easy informality disappeared, the banter in the room ceased as his companions recognized the change. The secretary became more serious; he stood straight; he became distant in attitude.

The others in the room noted the change in him and pulled back emotionally, showing their respect. The secretary had now assumed the role of a high government official with the decorum it required. He stood with dignity and reserve; he shook hands in farewell to his friends. Then he left the room to give his speech, entering the auditorium to thunderous applause.

In those few minutes he had shed his role as old friend and assumed his role as a high official of the government. Which then was the real person? Some may insist that it was the informal person, but he was also very much the national

leader. His personality was broad enough to encompass both roles.

To say that leadership is a role for many people is not to say that it is thereby neither natural nor honest. Thinking about leadership as a role reminds us that leadership, in large part, is about fulfilling (and exceeding) the expectations of others. Leadership requires a set of skills (described in Chapter 4), of which the most important is the ability to recognize the expectations surrounding you, because they define the role of the leader in the context in which you find yourself.

If you fulfill those expectations, then you are able to lead in those circumstances. It hardly matters whether fulfilling the expectations people have of a leader comes to you easily or with great difficulty, as long as you do it successfully. Whether naturally or with effort, you have become a leader.

Overcoming Personal Obstacles to Leadership

We've observed that not everyone is ideally suited by personality to become effective leaders. Can an introvert become an effective leader? Although we've said that leadership is not a particular personality trait, it is certainly easier for extroverts to play a role that requires interacting with many other people. Yet many introverts are able to learn skills, such as public speaking, that are significant to leadership. Even though introverts may become good at public speaking, it rarely becomes fun for them. They still have to discipline themselves to do it well.

In fact, many effective speakers are much more introverted than is generally known. One of the most famous business leaders of recent years was so fearful of public speaking that while he spoke and gestured with his right hand, he would

hold his left arm rigidly at his side, his left hand knotted into a tight fist, reflecting the tension caused by the firm control he was exerting on his whole body to force himself not only to remain in front of his audience, but even to appear to be relaxed as he spoke.

Another very well known CEO, a leader of an enormous firm, would stand behind the curtains of an auditorium before he was to give a talk, so nervous that he sweated profusely, wiping his brow with a handkerchief and almost unable to converse. Then when the introduction was over and he was announced, he'd gather himself together, stride onstage from where he'd been hiding, concealed from the audience's view, face the crowd, and speak so comfortably and informally that people in the audience would think he was completely at ease.

Difficult though it is for an introvert to assume the role of a public leader, it can be done, and often is. It's a matter of the desire to be effective in the role of leader and the self-discipline to accomplish it. Most people who hear and see such a person speak cannot tell the difference between the extrovert who is a natural leader and the introvert who struggles to be perceived as a natural leader.

Another important element of leadership is the exercise of power. In most organizations, leaders use power to mobilize the support and resources to get things done. (See Jeffrey Pfeffer, **Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organizations**, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1993.) In some ways public speaking and the use of power are almost at the opposite ends of a spectrum of tools of leadership. Public speaking relies on persuasion and rests on logic and emotion to gain support. Power relies on rewards and punishments. There is no distinction between extroverts and introverts in the use of power. But again, some people are

naturally comfortable exercising power; others are not at all; and some never will be. Yet all can be leaders. People uncomfortable exercising power can learn to do it—it's a part of what is expected of a leader. It is part of the role.

Whatever a person's natural qualities, he or she can become a leader if sufficient desire is there. For many people it's not easy, and it may be uncomfortable. Nevertheless, each of us can do it if we wish. In fact, as we noted above, many of the best leaders in our country have overcome substantial impediments to become effective leaders.

Here we will mention only two. One of America's greatest presidents was crippled as a young man by polio—a wasting disease that attacked many young people before it was finally virtually eliminated by a vaccine. The young man who got polio and lost the use of both his legs, so that he had to move around on crutches, was Franklin Delano Roosevelt—the only American ever elected president for four terms (1932-1945), and the president who led the U.S. successfully through World War II. He was a great leader despite being physically challenged.

In more recent years, one of America's most effective corporate chief executive officers has been Jack Welch of the General Electric Company. Welch has a speech impediment that causes him to stutter; yet he has trained himself to overcome the impediment so that, while CEO, he was able to give speech after speech to present his company to audiences of investors, employees, and customers.

President Roosevelt and Jack Welch both developed such outstanding leadership skills that people began to see them as charismatic. They were not leaders because they were charismatic, but rather the opposite—they seemed charismatic

because they were leaders. Similarly, with effort, each of us can become a leader, and if we become effective enough as leaders, we are likely to begin to seem charismatic to others.

Starting to Become a Leader

We begin the process of making ourselves leaders by starting with our imaginations. We imagine ourselves as leaders in front of a group of people giving a talk; imagine ourselves in the office suggesting a course of action to our fellow workers; imagine ourselves in a situation of danger or stress pointing the way for others to safety; imagine ourselves in a circumstance of great temptation urging others to take the ethical course. Such incidents are what leadership is about.

But we can imagine more. We can imagine ourselves in a position of continual leadership—perhaps we envision ourselves as president of a company, directing its employees day after day. Perhaps we envision ourselves as director of a not-for-profit organization that helps other people, and it's our responsibility to bring assistance to those in need. We have institutionalized our leadership in a position of authority—a position of leadership!

With imaginings like this in our minds, we can accustom ourselves to the notion of ourselves as leaders of other people. We can begin to acquire the skills that will make us leaders. At first, only we will see ourselves as leaders, but before long, as we act like leaders, others will recognize leadership in us and before we know it, we'll be what we set out to be: real leaders. The first step in this process is mental; the value, and impact, of being able to envision ourselves in these leadership roles can not be overestimated.

Fear of Being a Leader

To lead is to live dangerously. It's romantic and exciting to think of leadership as inspiring others, taking decisive action, and reaping rich rewards, but leading requires taking risks that can jeopardize one's career and one's personal life.

Political history is full of the tragic stories of people who sought to provide leadership and lost their lives or their freedom as a result. One can find modern examples daily in the news from abroad. In business, people who strive for leadership are sometimes forced out of their firms after losing power struggles to others.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2-2

KEY OBSTACLES TO LEARNING HOW TO LEAD

There are obstacles to leadership, usually of our own making, that we must overcome to be successful leaders:

- Believing that all leaders are born leaders
- Thinking that leadership can't be learned
- Fearing the risks and responsibilities of leadership



Leadership requires putting yourself on the line, disrupting the status quo, and bringing hidden conflicts to the surface. And when other people resist and push back, there's a strong temptation to play it safe. Those who choose to lead plunge in, take the risks, and sometimes get burned. (See Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, **Leadership on the Line: Staying**

Alive Through the Dangers of Leading, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.)

Because there is an element of career and personal danger in exercising leadership, one is likely to be somewhat fearful about reaching for a leadership role. We may be afraid that others will reject us in a leadership role, damaging our self-esteem or the respect others have for us. We may be afraid that we will lose out in a contest for leadership and our careers will suffer. For some, fear may become a paralyzing factor in the advancement of our careers.

The fear of damage to our pride if we seek to be leaders and fail might seem to be the easiest fear to overcome. But we live in an image-conscious society that makes it difficult for most of us to act in a manner consistent with the realization that the only person we have to prove anything to is ourselves.

Although fear should not force us to retreat from our goal of becoming a leader, it is a good idea to pause for a bit of self-reflection, which may prove instrumental in developing our character and our capability as leaders. We should take the opportunity to re-evaluate and realistically assess our situation, remaining confident in our goals, being persistent, and pressing on. This is an area where friends and family can be a great source of encouragement and strength.

To triumph over fear and use it to improve ourselves, we must establish checkpoints to ensure that we avoid allowing fear to become a paralyzing factor in our careers. One effective means of doing this is to seek feedback in our organizations from our superiors, employees, and peers that allows us to change paths quickly if we are heading in the wrong direction.

The founder and CEO of one of America's largest computer retail companies swallowed his pride a few years ago and accepted written evaluations from the people who worked directly for him.

What he found surprised him. He thought that he was an effective leader but feedback told a different story; people found him curt and almost rude. What did he do? He tore down the office wall separating him from other executives and replaced it with a glass wall and a glass door, which he usually leaves open during the day.

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