

Bristol MBA - Information for Postgraduate Education

How to be a Leader

Author: A.Wiederhold

When in the second term our class was introduced to the module "Leadership and Change" it seemed that we had reached the central part of our MBA education. Leadership - the word which never fails to energise a business student - holds the promise of power, freedom of decision, status and recognition. Academic literature gives us an abundance of models and theories about leadership styles. MBA classes learn about the "Ohio State Studies", "Theory X and Y", and "Blake's Grid", students identify delegating, supporting, coaching and directing. But is all this actually relevant?

Early theories argued that leaders are born. If that is true why bother? How useful is the application of management and leadership theory in practice? Theory is above all descriptive. It gives us a framework in which we can give structure to observations. With the leadership theories that have been published in the last decades we can easily explain every given situation and argue, why a person was or was not a leader.

Sometimes the leader is in fact a manager. Does that suggest that a manager is a leader? We get taught how to manage. Can we learn to be a leader? Does theory support this suggestion? Sadly, the answer is 'no'. Because we are comparing apples and oranges. Managers get work done through others. We can learn to motivate, to analyse, to plan, to think in work breakdown structures, SWOT and balanced scorecards. We can even be successful. But we may never be leaders. Because the success of a manager is based on following rules. Managers think in the box, operational, they have authority over subordinates.

Leaders on the other hand have charisma. Leaders inspire, they make or break rules, they are visionary. Leaders provoke emotions, they are meaning making. No matter who we look at in history or in our personal past. Those that emerged as leaders never relied on power over subordinates. They had influence over followers.

And something else becomes evident when we reflect on the topic of leadership. Managers are put in place. Leaders emerge from their environment. They are unique in their time and situation. But they always have a promise that offers their followers something to believe in.

This is where management theory on leadership fails. I would like to suggest that we don't stop searching for the path on which a person becomes a leader. We get taught management skills. Isn't it a set of skills that enables us to be successful? If we are brave enough to take on the right challenges, and lucky enough to succeed, we will develop confidence. It is that confidence that shows

others they can rely on us to lead them. That's what it is when we marvel at charisma. The charismatic leader communicates his confidence non-verbally, and spawns trust in those that are around him. His followers fall in love with his inspiring charisma. What ultimately emerges is power. The power to lead.

We can learn the skills to be managers, we can practice to be good managers. Hopefully that will lead to success which will fuel our confidence and shape our personality. But it will take the right time and the right environment to become a leader.