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Leaders: born or bred?

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Are leaders natural or nurtured? Are leaders talented or trained? Are leaders those in a 'position' or those with a passion? Let's find out

V Sundararajan

Globalisation has brought in a different perspective in the industrial sector and the advent of multinationals in our country has also created a new climate of industrial culture.

Leadership is an often debated topic, one which has no definite answer. While a majority of people lean towards leadership as an 'in-born' trait, there is an equally vocal section of society which is of the opinion that leadership can be 'acquired' and 'learned' over a period of time. As Vince Lombardi, a famous American football player, coach, and executive, once said, "Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile." This rings louder in the current context, when organisations are scrambling to identify, source and retain talented leaders, even if it's at a premium.

Such is the demand for leaders, but the question still arises - how does one identify them? Is it that all individuals who form the top echelons within the organisation (by virtue of their experience, knowledge and rank) become leaders? To get to the root of that question, there are many other aspects that come to the fore when we plan to define a leader. Some of the 'top-of-the mind' ones are - who are real leaders? Are they special people with extraordinary powers? Are leaders born or bred? Are leaders natural or nurtured? Are leaders talented or trained? Are leaders those in a position or those with a passion?

One associates leaders to famous personalities such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi. However, in the real world, we are surrounded by leaders in every sphere of our life, who shape and define the destinies of people and organisations. These are people who command respect and admiration for having the rare ability to bring about a collaborative team effort, wherein the 'whole is sometimes greater than the sum of its parts'.

When a commoner dons the mantle of leadership by their act of courage or takes ownership for a situation, it is not by their position that they help motivate a team but by their act or deed. Clearly, leadership resides in the realms of 'perception' and if one takes a leadership stance in any situation, it is largely by the virtue of perception that they gain the confidence of the people around them. Leadership does not boil down to those in power or important positions; anyone can lead from any seat. Similarly, in our everyday work scenario, people often witness instances when either they or their co-workers get an opportunity to showcase their leadership capabilities in challenging or trying situations, and it is generally those who step-up to the occasion who get 'perceived' as leaders. What differentiates one from being a leader is not their position, rank within the organisational hierarchy, but rather it is more to do with their 'willingness' to step into situations others fear or choose not to tread into, preferring to maintain the status-quo.

Organisations actively seek to identify and promote exceptional leadership talent through various innovative programmes. Organisations go about this by creating challenging and exciting positions for people who take on extra responsibilities going beyond their regular KRAs and call of duty. They are rewarded with a raise on their base compensation and a higher weightage during promotions.

To sum it up, organisations will need to continuously strive to identify and promote leadership talent through an ecosystem that is communicative and open and one which fosters collaboration and inclusivity across levels.

- The author is fellow and head of TEG, QuEST Global

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BORN OR BRED? (Jpeg)

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