

Critically analyse the following essay.

## **Is leadership a skill that can be taught or is it an innate ability?**

### **Introduction**

Leadership is easily one of the most sought after and best-rewarded talents in the corporate world, politics and other spheres of life. A 1998 study by McKinsey & Company established that, up to 75% of companies were chronically short of leadership. The study projected that the demand for intelligent, sophisticated, globally astute, technologically literate and operationally flexible talent would remain a challenge for decades to come (Chambers et al, 1998). With the rapid expansion of the global economy and unpredictable changes in operating environments, the need for leadership has never been greater. Yet, the nature and function of leadership remains one of the most dynamic and subjective concepts that has defied centuries of theoretical thought, research, practice and interest (Chamber *et al*, 1998, p.274). Among the outstanding issues remains the argument whether leadership is an innate ability or can be learnt like any other skill. While this paper does not presume to have found the answer, it argues that leadership is a skill that can be achieved through effort, training, education, practice and experience (Swaroop & Prasad, 2013).

### **Leadership Concept**

In order to understand leadership's nature and whether it is innate or acquired, it is helpful to understand different notion of leadership. Rowe (2007) and Northhouse (2007) conceive leadership as a process by which a person influences a group to attain a desired goal. The process perspective argues that leadership is a contextual phenomenon that arises from the interactions between followers and leaders. In addition, leadership is a multi-directional, interactive effort that involves a measure of influence to direct the energies of a group towards serving a mutual purpose (Northhouse, 2007).

On the other hand, the trait perspective of leadership defines leadership as a characteristic or set of characteristics possessed in different degrees by people (Northhouse, 2007). This approach emphasises individual leadership qualities such as motives, personality, skills and values. Further, there is a difference between assigned and emergent leadership. Assigned leadership refers to the appointment of people to positions of authority, whether or not they have the capacity to lead (Connelly & Rudnick, 2001; Kotter, 2011), e.g. heads of state. Emergent leaders are those who are perceived to be and accepted as influential members of communities, groups and organizations and thus assume leadership roles (Rowe, 2007; Northhouse, 2007). According to the social identity theory, emergent leadership is dependent on how well individuals fit into the group's identity as a whole (Rowe, 2007).

### **Innate Leadership**

The standpoint that leadership is innate has largely been popularised by corporate succession planning practices. Many organisations have devised systems to identify the best leaders in the industry and with the right compensation, they attract and retain them. This practice is driven by the fact that it is difficult to change people and instead of attempting to, companies look for the best and hire them (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Chambers *et al*, 1998). Even individuals who have innate leadership traits, such as vision, inspiration and determination, are trapped in stagnant organisation succession plans without opportunities to develop and apply their skills (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). The idea of developing

leadership capacity is unpopular because offering adequate learning opportunities and experiences requires heavy resource commitment and time. High annual employee turnovers and the existence of predatory organisations that seek to poach talents discourage companies from investing in building their own talents. In addition, developing effective leaders for an organisation requires that groups accurately diagnose their leadership needs and identify high potential individuals. This is a risky process, which given the great expense, is very unattractive to organisational leaders, whose pay check largely depends on the short term performance (Byham, 2010).

### **Acquired Leadership**

According to Kotter (2011), leadership occurs daily and everywhere. This assertion is backed by the hugely influential contingency theory, which argues that leadership is dependent on certain situations (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Michael Brown's leadership as the director of the United States' Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) before and after Hurricane Katrina is illustrative of this argument. When Katrina hit, FEMA failed to order timely evacuation of vulnerable populations and was ill-prepared to respond to the situation, despite its massive resources and having received ample warnings from the National Hurricane Centre of the impending disaster. Neither was FEMA able to plan for and coordinate emergency responses among the local, state and federal agencies, while mobilising its own staff, sister-agencies and the military to deal with the crisis (U.S. House of Representatives, 2006).

Effective leaders are characterised by vision, charisma, strategic thought, inspiration, integrity, confidence, communication and decisiveness - traits which can be taught. In addition, leadership involves coping with and adapting to change, and the ability to learn and apply lessons from previous experiences (Connelly & Rudnick, 2001). The American auto industry, for instance, has fallen behind its Japanese and German competitors because of its failure to improve product quality, efficiency, performance and service, despite these being clear market trends decades ago. The lack of innovation, motivation and strategic vision came to a head during the 2008/2009 global economic crisis, when GM and Chrysler needed the federal government bailout in order to stay afloat. In the United Kingdom, the global economic crisis also exposed leadership failures by institutions such as Northern Rock and the Royal Bank of Scotland. These organisations not only ignored clear warnings of a market crash, but they also failed to learn proper lessons from the Asian economic crisis in 1997 (Gros & Alcidi, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

While it is impossible to define or even describe leadership as a concept, many people know leadership when they see it. Most, if not all the skills necessary for effective leadership identified in this paper can be acquired or encouraged in people (Drucker, 2011; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Connelly & Rudnick, 2001). It is undeniable that there are leaders who are born, but such leaders are too few and undependable, given the huge demand for leadership. In addition, it is clear that leadership not only requires continuous learning and adaptation, but is also a function of interactions between the leader and the followers. The fact that leadership can be taught and it is a process of leader-follower interaction reduces the burden on leaders, because they never have to know all the answers (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

## References

- Beechler, S., & Woodward, I. (2009). The Global "War for Talent". *Journal of International Management* 15 , 273–285.
- Byham, W. C. (2010). *Are Leaders Born or Made?* London: Deloitte.
- Chambers, E., Foulon, M., Handfield-Jones, H., Hankin, S. E., & Michaels, I. (1998). The war for talent. *The McKinsey Quarterly* 3 , 44–57.
- Connelly, K., & Rudnick, E. (2001). Born with it or Not: Leadership Requires Learning. *Web Exclusives*
- Drucker, P. F. (2011). What Makes an Effective Executive? In H. B. Review, *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership* (pp. 23-36). Boston: Harvard Business Review.
- Gros, D., & Alcidi, C. (2010). *The Impact of the Financial Crisis on the Real Economy*. New York: Intereconomics.
- Heifetz, R., & Laurie, D. (1997). The Work of Leadership. In H. B. Review, *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership* (pp. 57-78). Boston: Harvard Business Review.
- Kotter, J. (2011). What Leaders Really Do. In H. B. Review, *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.
- Northhouse, P. G. (2007). *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. New York: SAGE.
- Rowe, G. (2007). *Cases in Leadership (Ivey Casebook)*. New York: SAGE Publications, Inc .
- Sternberg, R. (2004). *Successful intelligence: Finding a Balance*. .
- Swaroop, K. R., & Prasad, N. G. (2013). Are leaders Born or Made? *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing & Management Review Vol.2 (8)* , 34-42.
- U.S. House of Representatives. (2006). *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina*. Washington: Government Printing Office.