



Leader and Leadership from a psychological perspective

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Abstract.

The issue of leadership is one of the most topical. The focus of the research is on identifying the characteristics a person must possess to be a leader, where the term indicates anyone who has a role in coordinating and guiding a group of people. In a globalised world in which production processes are carried out by teams of people, the possibility of identifying people with leadership skills or, better still, of training people to be leaders acquires fundamental importance. The article attempts to identify the intellectual, personality, emotional and relational characteristics of a leader and suggest ways to 'educate' for leadership, highlighting the centrality of psychology in the study, identification and enhancement of these characteristics.

Keywords: leader, leadership, psychological traits of leader, .

1. Introduction

The concepts of leaders and leadership have monopolised various fields of research for several years. The term 'leader', formerly attributed almost exclusively to 'commanders' such as Julius Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte or, more recently, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Mao Tze Tung, has gradually been extended to political figures of different stature and importance and also used in the organisational sphere to indicate those who take on the role of point of reference/coordinator of groups of individuals. Whereas in the past, the emergence of a leader was mainly a matter of chance, today's society is interested in identifying and 'building' leadership to cope with the countless situations in which this role is required for an organisation to function properly.

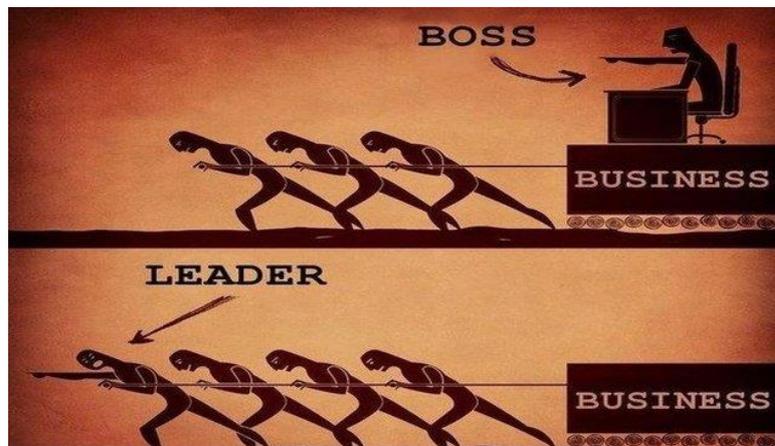


Figure 1: From a stereotypical to a more actual idea of leadership

It is therefore not just a question of studying the conditions that can favour the emergence of a leader, but of studying the characteristics that enable some people to assume leadership and of assessing whether and to what extent these characteristics can be acquired or shaped through learning. Psychology, as we shall see, is a candidate in its own right as the most appropriate discipline for studying the characteristics of the leader, assessing them and setting up programmes to implement them. In fact, a leader differs from a follower because he/she possesses: certain personality characteristics; greater assertiveness; interpersonal skills; emotional intelligence; ability to work in a team.....all aspects studied by psychologists.

2. Is one born a leader or does one become?

The diatribe about whether psychological characteristics [personality, intelligence, emotionality, memory] are hereditary or the result of the environment in which a person develops and grows has characterised much of the theoretical debate in psychology.

Among the psychological characteristics that have been most debated are intelligence and personality, two components that are part of the necessary background of a leader.

Perhaps the most heated discussion is the one that pitted Eysenck and Kamin against each other in *The Intelligence Controversy* (1981), 192 pages of back-and-forth between those who argue that intelligence is largely due to the genetic heritage of parents and those who argue that it is the environment in which one lives and develops that determines it.

The debate has gone downhill over the years, but the most recent research claims that 55-60% of an individual's intelligence is genetically based [Lynn, 2016], meaning

that it is possible to be born with an intellectual potential determined by that of one's natural parents but, at the same time, that it is the environment in which one grows up that will determine whether or not that potential is realised.

A similar argument can be made for personality: character and temperament are terms by which we indicate the personological characteristics of an individual, and it is common experience to hear talk of temperament even in reference to children in the first days of their lives.

Personality characteristics would be 50-55% genetically based [Bouchard, 1984; Tellegen et al. 1988].

So, to the question "*Is one born a leader?*" we can answer that every individual at birth may possess, to a greater or lesser extent, the potential to be a leader.

This potential may be realised to a greater or lesser extent depending on the environment in which an individual grows up and the experiences he or she will have during his or her life.

The next question is "*Does one become a leader?*" (i.e. "*Is it possible to learn leadership?*")

The first answer I can give to this question is "*probably yes, but each of us is more or less likely to be a leader*". Much will depend on the basic characteristics (heritage effect) and environmental opportunities that can shape the basic characteristics and implement the skills needed to be a leader.

The second answer is "*a leader is built on the basis of a person's individual characteristics and by providing the necessary knowledge/skills to develop leadership*".

The contribution of psychology to the construction of leadership takes place on two different levels: on the one hand, identifying the characteristics that determine being a leader, and on the other hand, defining how to intervene on these characteristics in order to implement them, thus fostering the growth of leadership in people.

In order to identify the characteristics of leadership, it is necessary to conduct a thorough psychological investigation into the characteristics of natural leaders, i.e. those who have been endowed with the necessary skills to become leaders.

3. Who is a natural leader?

Natural leaders are often referred to as people who display the necessary characteristics to impose themselves on others, to capture their attention, to establish loyal relationships, to build a following.

Natural leaders use the personological and intellectual characteristics with which they are born: these are sometimes sufficient to achieve their leadership goals, but history teaches us that the longevity of these leaders is not particularly long.

Some of the predominantly innate qualities that characterise natural leaders are: a good eloquence, a magnetic gaze, the ability to convey confidence, assertiveness and a histrionic attitude. To these must be added skills derived from experience and, as we shall see, training such as listening skills, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and decision-making.

This list may not be exhaustive, but it represents a large part of the skills/competencies that underpin leadership: possessing them to a greater or lesser

extent at birth is hereditary, increasing them to increase one's chances of assuming the role of leader is related to training. Of course, the components of leadership listed here are not susceptible in equal measure to the learning process: as we shall see, in some cases training allows significant improvements, in others the progress is less significant but still contributes to the development of an individual's leadership capabilities. What I intend to argue is that each individual can develop the characteristics of the leader: the goodness of the result will depend on the characteristics already possessed by birth and the effectiveness of the training. Just as for intelligence, training can modify IQ levels but on the basis of the initial hereditary endowment, so for leadership the outcome will depend on the level of the characteristics necessary to be a leader possessed by the person undergoing the training. In other words, just as an intellectually normal person who grows up in a challenging environment will not become a genius, so a person who is not naturally predisposed to leadership will not become a leader but may be able to assume leadership in less competitive contexts.

4. How improve the leadership's skills?

Let us now look individually at the leadership characteristics we have listed and illustrate possible ways to implement them.

Loquacity is a largely innate trait, but the use of speech is something that is acquired with time, experience, practice and ... good reading.

In order to improve speech, it is first and foremost necessary to expand the vocabulary at one's disposal as much as possible and to take care of sentence construction. Speaking fluently, using a broad but comprehensible vocabulary, increases the likelihood that the listener will see in the speaker a reference figure, someone to be listened to attentively, someone whose cultural superiority is recognised.

One must become aware of the importance of the paralinguistic aspects of communication (tone of voice, speed of speech, etc.) as well as the non-verbal components (posture, gestures, etc.). These aspects are dealt with in the courses on communicating effectively, in which the importance of paralinguistic and non-verbal aspects is recognised in best explicating the concepts one wants to express in words. Obviously being knowledgeable is not enough, knowledge must be translated into automatisms and the best way is to participate in discussions, real or simulated, with others in a sort of contradictory way.

The trust of others can be gained in various ways: by being available, appearing trustworthy, having a friendly appearance and behaviour.

Some of these aspects can be modified, e.g., by paying attention to the way one dresses and behaves; others are achieved through the consistency of one's behaviour and the development of relational skills, which we will come back to.

Knowing their importance means being able to try to modulate them in the most suitable way to foster leadership.

Assertiveness belongs to personality characteristics and therefore has a strong hereditary component.

However, it is possible to practise it in role-play situations by learning to modulate one's assertiveness in search of a balance that allows not only the achievement of leadership but also its maintenance.

The *histrionic personality component* is innately based and determines substantial differences between individuals in their ability to 'play a role' in front of an audience. However, acting experience shows how, through study and practice, almost anyone can learn to act: the greater or lesser success achieved will probably depend on the possession of innate histrionic capacities, but this does not prevent anyone from developing the actor in them.

Taking drama courses, through which one learns not only how to manage the presence of an audience but also how to accompany speech with appropriate posture and intonation, can help develop this component that is so important for a leader.

Being able to listen is a skill that can be developed.

Knowing how to put oneself from the other's point of view, not putting one's own ideas and beliefs first but accepting those of the people with whom we interact, means being a point of reference for those who come to us, i.e., making an interpersonal relationship trustworthy.

In order to be able to listen to others, we must, first of all, abandon any form of narcissism, we must put the other person at the core of our attention, temporarily forgetting about ourselves and our beliefs. We must adopt a non-judging attitude and abandon stereotypes.

These results can be achieved through intense work on oneself: participation in reflection groups can be a good solution.

The more isolated a leader is, the more likely he is to lose his leadership.

Knowing how to maintain good interpersonal relations means strengthening the bond between the leader and the group he or she leads.

Managing personal relationships involves several components that we have already covered or will cover in the next rows such as emotional intelligence and listening skills.

We must always remember that any group is, originally, made up of people who may be very different from each other even if they share a common interest or passion.

Therefore, the leader's approach will have to be at least partly customised. This is especially true when working with small groups, as in the educational field.

Here again, role-playing techniques can be useful to improve interpersonal skills by engaging in real-life simulations.

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to control one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to distinguish between them and to use this information to guide one's thoughts and actions.

This concept, introduced in 1990 by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer, was later popularized by Daniel Goleman [Goleman, 1995; Perloff, 1997], who published, among others, a volume entitled *Leadership: The Power of Emotional Intelligence* in 2011. In his writings, Goleman emphasises the importance of emotional intelligence in the modulation of relationships between individuals and, consequently, how essential it is for a good leader to possess a good level of emotional intelligence.

Like all types of intelligence, emotional intelligence has a hereditary component, but it can be implemented by learning to recognise the signals of non-verbal communication that can modify the interpretation of the actions and words of the people with whom we are in relationship.

Correctly interpreting the communicative intentions of those in front of us means being able to modulate our responses in the best way possible and establish fruitful and appropriate communication.

This is the prerequisite for optimal interpersonal relationships and is a fundamental characteristic of a leader. It is evident that certain components, which we have already examined, are involved in emotional intelligence: being able to listen, being able to entertain personal relationships and knowing how to use the non-verbal components of language are typical characteristics of those with good emotional intelligence. Consequently, the actions suggested to implement them indirectly foster the development of emotional intelligence.

Decision-making is one of the most successful topics in psychology in different disciplines, since every moment of our lives is characterised by choices.

Decision-making does not mean being a decisionalist.

Decision-making is a particular form of thinking whereby one chooses between several possible actions/behaviours usually in a very short time.

In decision-making, the use of so-called thinking heuristics is frequent.

A heuristic is a shortcut that allows a decision to be made more quickly than the more traditional forms of thinking. But by employing heuristics, the probability of coming to the wrong conclusion or making the least suitable decision is much greater.

Studying the different heuristics, evaluating their advantages and disadvantages and learning how to use them appropriately are actions that improve one's decision-making abilities.

A leader is asked to make decisions and these decisions are expected to be the best possible because they are usually taken on behalf of one's team, of the people who feel represented by the leader.

5. Conclusions

But why improve leadership?

The global organisation of work requires that the main activities are carried out in teams.

For teamwork to be fruitful, it is not enough to organise a group of people: participants need to be familiar with the mechanisms of leadership whether they are leaders or “just” team members.

Improving knowledge of the mechanisms involved in the leadership process and developing leadership skills can be done with adult individuals: the result will be a strengthening of the typical characteristics of leaders in those who are defined as natural leaders and an improvement in others.

In practice, training in adulthood tends to preserve hereditary differences.

In order to aim for realignment, i.e. for the environment to reduce possible gaps between individuals, it is necessary to act from an early age.

So, what role for leadership in education processes?

Leadership in education processes has a dual function: on the one hand, the educator, who works with larger or smaller groups, must know how to position himself as a leader in order to foster the transmission of knowledge and develop the ethical, social and personal qualities of the learners; on the other hand, education systems have the function of training the citizens of tomorrow, who may find themselves, in the most diverse fields, having to play the role of leader or having to interface with leadership figures.

Obviously, the concept of leader must be considered outside the stereotype of one who addresses crowds, leads parties or makes a name for him/herself in show business. People who are generally trained in educational systems will go on to hold leadership positions mainly at the middle level, a level that is crucial for the smooth functioning of the sectors in which they will be employed.

Training in the characteristics a leader must possess and the skills he or she must acquire, carried out during the normal schooling process, will certainly be more incisive than training with adults. For these reasons, school training programmes should include activities aimed at developing the skills/competences described in this article, skills and competences that are transversal, i.e. useful for the harmonious development of a person from an intellectual, relational and social point of view, as well as for training individuals capable of working in a team, regardless of the role they will assume within it.

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