
LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: ARE LEADERS BORN OR MADE?

Neither. Many leadership experts have addressed this question: are leaders born or made? Our perspective—based on 20 years of experience coaching senior executives and teams, and from the research we have conducted—is that the best single predictor of great leadership is the commitment to self-improvement.

Barring any extraordinary circumstances, anyone can work through their issues and improve their leadership if they are willing to take an honest look in the mirror first (before looking out the window for externalities).

One executive we worked with was already an excellent, high-potential leader. She received first rate scores on the initial 360 feedback assessment we conducted. Senior management was grooming her for the CFO role. Still, as our work with her demonstrates, there is always an opportunity for improvement. When we conducted a reassessment after six months of executive coaching, her already high scores went up even more due to her:

- **Commitment.** Her stance from the beginning was, “I will stick to this self-development plan.”
- **Humility.** She has a will to learn.
- **Respect for others.** She listens to other people.
- **Awareness of her impact on others.** She understands that what she does impacts how others do.
- **Evolution.** She has a deep desire to grow to become more effective.

In addition to that type of anecdotal evidence, we have conducted three types of research that supports the assertion that executives who are committed to self-development improve as leaders.

- We hear time and again from executives in coaching and their stakeholders that those who are most committed to putting in the effort to become better leaders are the ones who actually do. Our data back that up. We have found a positive correlation between a leader’s commitment to learning and self-development, and perceptions of his or her leadership effectiveness.
- Leaders who create and follow through on an action plan based on feedback from their peers, boss, and direct reports are perceived as being more effective than those who do not. There is a positive correlation between stakeholders’ perceptions of leaders’ effectiveness and the degree to which they are observed to be following up on their action plan for improvement. Following up takes commitment. It means not only working to improve but also going back periodically to stakeholders who provided 360 feedback and having a dialog about progress.
- Clients who commit to engaging in Strategic Executive Coaching® self-report growth in leadership abilities. Obviously, two things are at work here: one is the commitment to do it and the other is the actual benefit from the work they put into the coaching experience itself.

Having innate talent never hurts. However, we have seen that executives who work on improving their leadership and demonstrate their commitment to improve are seen by their stakeholders as more effective leaders, regardless of what their starting point was. Clearly, those who are open to feedback, open to sponsorship and mentorship, open to coaching and learning, will always have an edge in this world. What does this imply for your future success?

- **Make a commitment to your own development.** What are you doing today for your continued professional and personal growth and success?
- **Ask for feedback** from people who are impacted by you as a leader and even as a person in your life (e.g., friends, spouse...).
- **Consider 360 feedback or other assessments** to learn how you come across to others. What do they see as your development needs and your strengths?
- **Create a strategic plan for your training and education.** You may do this alone, with your boss, a co-worker, HR, your spouse, a mentor, or any number of resources. When is the last time you took any courses or training?
- **Get a mentor, sponsor, coach, or all three...**the key is someone you believe in who has the confidence to tell it like they see it and is smart enough to call you on your bluffs. No matter how senior you are, these partnerships are invaluable to leaders, particularly at the top.

How are you demonstrating your commitment to your continued professional growth and development? Do you know how people perceive your improvement as a leader over time?