

ALN

Developing Your Natural Talent to Lead

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It seems that leadership comes naturally to very few and executive programs rarely instill it, which isn't surprising because leadership is innate—more a talent than a skill and certainly not a tick list. However, Herb Stevenson, an executive development specialist, says that leadership derives from traits of emotional maturity which may lie behind unexamined assumptions about oneself—assumptions that have never been tested and may have no basis in fact.



Herb Stevenson believes it is possible to find and nurture personal qualities that fund the capacity to lead.

So, while it isn't possible to inject leadership ability, he says, it is possible to find and nurture personal qualities that fund the capacity to lead. Let's see how that works in practice.

BE FULLY PRESENT

In Stevenson's view, a leader is able to:

Be fully present without preconceived notions; yet, be prepared to take action and enforce boundaries.

Pay complete attention—both to what people say and to how they feel about what they say.

Create structure within which people may design a way ahead, and then remain open as to outcome.

Speak his or her mind straightforwardly, being firm, fair, and factual and steering clear of blame.

The starting point is paying complete attention; what Stevenson calls being fully present. That is, in any setting you stay clear about your integrity while open to thoughts, perspectives, ideas, and suggestions. In this way leaders learn from every event—about the people, their views, their promise, and where the moment sits in the big picture.

What gets in the way? Stevenson points to ordinary distractions and preconceived notions, such as joining a meeting only to drift off as important issues of the day dance in the mind's eye: the inbox, the vacant technician spot, funding challenges, or any number of important items that are of concern at that time. The issues are pressing; yet, while you were thinking about them did you grasp the discussion points fully enough to draw conclusions and recommend action?

When meetings are back to back, it's only natural to wish this one would hurry along and then to glance covertly at the watch. Did you miss important information about the speaker or the information she presented? More consequential, what do you miss if you dismiss someone's views no matter how fastidious the evidence, or arrive at a meeting with an outcome in mind and wait patiently for your chance to sway thinking.

Leaders, Stevenson says, temporarily empty the mind and take everything in, assessing, analysing, evaluating as they go, in order to learn. From that starting point, one may create structure, guide and steer, and be clear when evaluating, planning, communicating decisions, and speaking with others.

DEVELOPING THE PERSONAL QUALITIES THAT FUND LEADERSHIP ABILITY

What's the connection between being fully present and developing leadership qualities? It's in the work one does to become fully present. In Stevenson's world, the road to leadership includes stories and conversations about aspects of emotional maturity: integrity, habits of reflection, being at ease with plain speaking, and being at ease in the quietness of being alone. In the course of the conversations and reflections, one develops insight about oneself and others, and quietly becomes a fully present person.

I asked Stevenson why reflection fosters emotional growth and the capacity to lead.

He told me, “You stop talking at others and begin to enjoy significant exchange. Moving ahead, you experience the desire to form a community and explore what it means to be a member of one. Along the way you welcome cycles of life and the stages of change. You recognise archetypes—such as being perpetual heroes or unconscious victims—and can avoid being sidetracked by them. You avoid being consumed by energies of the trickster and/or fool. You find your own deep sense of compassion and receptivity, and ultimately claim internal power.

“Throughout the exchange of stories and ideas”, Stevenson continued, “each person becomes aware of personal values and the consequences of actions, and develops a propensity for doing the right thing. That may be surprising, but it’s how we’re built. Reflecting on these topics, and discussing them—moving closer to being fully present by being closer to ourselves and to others—also moves individuals toward a core moral sentiment which is personal, and therefore to a core moral sentiment for the organisation. And then, the leader, now fully present, will use the energy of an organisation to create a sustainable world via a profitable organisation rather than simply a strong balance sheet”.

Overall, aspiring leaders should recognise and release habits and patterns of the past and move on from the enemies of maturity in order to take up the balanced actions of a mature leader.

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