Fact and Fiction:
The Changing Nature of Leadership

Myths About Leadership

The myths about leadership date back to the turn of the 20th century when leadership was first formally studied by psychologists and sociologists. In ancient Greece, only men with potbellies were thought to be great leaders. In Celtic lands, birds were thought to confer leadership powers. Historically, some believe that only people with charismatic personalities make powerful leaders. The myths of leadership include:

- Leaders are born, not made.
- Leadership is hierarchical, and you need to hold a formal position (have status and power) to be considered a leader.
- You have to have charisma to be an effective leader.
- There is one standard way of leading.
- It is impossible to be a manager and a leader at the same time.
- You only need to have common sense to be an effective leader.

Truths About Leadership

The truths about leadership we propose are based on our collective research and years of study and teaching, and on our own experiences as leaders. We propose the following:

1. **Leaders are made, not born.** Many people have the capacity to lead an organization, community, family, profession, and, most important, themselves. Some individuals will not describe themselves as leaders based on traditional notions of formal leadership when, in fact, they do make a difference in their organization through their commitment, values, and actions toward change. Leaders are not born with innate characteristics or skills predisposing them to be leaders (Gardner, 1990). A person's environment can influence the development of leadership skills and interests (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1993; Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005).

2. **In today's fluid organizations, leadership occurs at all levels.** Progressive organizations are striving to flatten their hierarchies to empower people throughout the organization to participate in the leadership process. Manz and Sim's (1989) self-managing teams concept is an example of people at the "worker-level" being responsible for high-level decision making and behavioral control over an organization's process and outcomes. People find meaning in their organizational life and work through shared experiences and a feeling of being empowered to make a contribution or difference.

3. **Having a charismatic personality is not a prerequisite for leadership.** A charismatic leader is one who has "profound and unusual effects on followers" (Yukl, 1994, p. 318). Charismatic leaders are often described as visionaries who have a strong desire for power; leaders have been called impression managers who have a keen ability to motivate others and set an example for others to follow (Yukl, 1994). However, many effective and accomplished leaders are not described as charismatic. For every positive example of a charismatic leader, we can find a negative charismatic. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. is described positively as a charismatic leader who organized a nation to fight for civil rights for all its citizens, whereas Adolph Hitler is viewed negatively as an example of a charismatic leader who influenced a nation to senselessly and unmercifully kill millions of people because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, or disability.

4. **There is not one identifiable right way to lead an organization or group.** On an individual level, a person's leadership approach or style might be influenced by his or her sex, cultural identity, or personal value system. On an organizational level, the context of the setting might determine the type of leadership required to be effective. Leading volunteer civilian organizations calls for a very different leadership approach than does leading a for-profit organization.

Excerpted from Komives, S.R., Lucas, N., & McMahon, T.R. (2013). The Changing Nature of
http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/posting.php?ID=1304

5. **Some leaders and scholars believe it is important to make a distinction between the processes of management and leadership** (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Gardner, 1990; Zaleznik, 1977). Gardner goes to great lengths to describe the differences between the functions of managers and leaders. He defines a manager as "the individual so labelled [who] holds a directive post in an organization, presiding over the processes by which the organization functions, allocating resources prudently, and making the best possible use of people" (p. 3). The manager is closely bound to an organization or institution, whereas a leader may not have an organization at all. Florence Nightingale is an example of such a leader. Yet others find the exercise of determining the differences between leadership and management to have little utility and use the terms interchangeably (Yukl, 1994).

Another proposition is that managers are preoccupied with doing things the right way, whereas leaders focus on doing the right thing (Zaleznik, 1977). There are distinctions between management and leadership, and there is also overlap in the functions associated with both processes (Gardnre, 1990). It behoves leaders who also perform managerial tasks such as resource allocation and organizing systems to be effective managers and to perform those functions well. It is possible, and in some cases desirable, for a person to be an effective leader while being an effective manager. The functions of both leadership and management, if they can be distinguished, are necessary in organizations. Most important is the ability to discern when and how to facilitate management and administrative functions in the leadership process and who has the best strengths to execute those tasks.

6. **Leadership is a discipline that is teachable** (Gardner, 1990; Parks, 2005). Any participant with a desire to lead or to assume leadership responsibilities can be taught certain skills and processes. Leadership is not just common sense. Catherine the Great, John F. Kennedy, Sitting Bull, and Harriet Tubman did not rise to greatness serendipitously. They had a mission or purpose and they all experienced life events that

shaped their values and sharpened their skills. Learning about leadership and developing as a leader is a lifelong process involving preparation, experience, trial-and-error, self-examination, and a willingness to learn from mistakes and successes. Your own leadership development might have started early in elementary school as the lead in your sixth-grade play, or it may have begun later in your career when you become an elected official or community activist at the age of fifty.

References

Bennis, W.G., & Thomas, R.J. (2002). *Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Gardner, J.W. (1990). *On Leadership.* New York, NY: Free Press.

Hughes, R. L., Ginnett, R.C., & Curphy, G.J. (1993). *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience.* Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin.

Komives, S.R., Owen, J.E., Longerbeam, S., Mainella, F.C., & Osteen, L. (2005). "Developing a Leadership Identity: A Grounded Theory." *Journal of College Student Development*, 46, 593-611.

Manz, C.C., & Sims J., H.P. (1989). *SuperLeadership: Leading Others to Lead Themselves*. New York, NY: Berkley Books.

Parks, S.D. (2005). *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.