

# Can Leaders Learn?

by Surinder Deol

Another way of asking the same question: can leadership skills be taught in meaningful ways? It is interesting that “leadership development” didn’t enter business vocabulary until the late 1970s, but at present it is one of the most important questions facing all kind of business enterprises—large and small. The number of books and articles written on the subject during the last 10 years alone would fill a whole library.

*Harvard Business Review*, the source of current management theology, devoted its December 2001 issue to the topic of leadership—the first special issue in HBR history. And around the same time I saw a copy of *Business Week* (January 14, 2002 issue) that devoted several pages to the top 25 managers of the year 2001.

What do you think are the “required readings” for business leaders of tomorrow? They are not the titles that you would buy at an airport kiosk. If we agree with HBR, leaders need to read Machiavelli, Thomas Carlyle, Sigmund Freud, Hannah Arendt, Chester Barnard, Hamilton and Madison, and Martin Luther King. All great readings, but whoever thought of that before? And when asked where did they learn their leadership skills, some key business leaders mentioned inspirational sources such as basketball coaches, moms and dads, a junior colleague, an ill tempered boss, and religious texts like the Bible and the Bhagvad Gita.

The most controversial piece in HBR to my mind was the lead article “Primal Leaders: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance” by Daniel Goleman and others. It is billed as a “research based article” using the material from emotional intelligence—the key theory behind it. The

problem I have with this is not that emotional intelligence is a bad theory; *it is an incomplete theory*. Who can dispute the fact that people who display a better mood most of the time become effective leaders compared with people who have foul temperaments? The theory is all about brain (neurology) and says nothing much about programming! The brain research is an appealing hook because it is something concrete and smells of good empirical work by outstanding “scientists.” But there is something missing here. Let me use an analogy. If the picture tube is bad, my TV is going to give me a really bad picture. But the picture tube on its own does not generate programming that satisfies my entertainment or intellectual needs. This need is met from a different source. If the brain is like the picture tube (an organ) the source of programming could be “mind” or “consciousness” or something else. It is really unfortunate that Daniel Goleman, who is a deeply spiritual person because he spent years in India meeting gurus and rishis and knows these distinctions well, has fallen into the trap of packaging a concept that is generating millions of dollars in revenues every year but which is shallow at its very core. Of course, people love simple explanations. If I can tweak my brain a little bit then I would become a great leader! Simple solutions sell easily and well in today’s market.

There is also a great deal of confusion whether leaders and managers are the same breed. HBR reprinted John Kotter’s 1990 article “What Leaders Really Do” that clarified some essential differences. Kotter was right: leadership and management are two distinctive but complementary systems of action. There is no such thing as “leader-managers.” Management is about coping with complexity and leadership by contrast is about coping

with change. The tools of management are planning and budgeting, organizing and staffing, controlling and problem-solving. Leadership, on the other hand, is about setting a direction, aligning people, motivating and inspiring. This is a simple thing, but I know organizations spend a lot of time and money developing leader-managers with mixed results. It is rare to see a great manager who is also a great leader or vice versa. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani may have passed this test under most challenging circumstances, but not many other executives are capable of making this transition.

Of the *Business Week* list of 25 managers, Oprah Winfrey is clearly a leader (a leader in the business of soothing souls), but others like Louis Gerstner (IBM) are effective managers with some leadership qualities. And what qualities make a great manager? Based on the profiles in the magazine, these are focus, fast decision making, commitment to innovation and creativity, trust building, customer satisfaction, community work, challenging hobbies like marathon running, and unwavering commitment to quality.

Where does NLP stand with regard to leadership development? As in many other areas, the seminal

contribution comes from Robert Dilts, and his book *Visionary Leadership Skills* (1996) is a very useful addition to the literature on the subject. Robert's work fills the vacuum left by the mainstream literature, namely, the distinctions between meta, macro and micro forms of leadership. Also, he uses the systems framework to link interconnections between self (self-leadership skills), system (systems thinking skills), goal (strategic thinking skills), and others (relational skills). Also, Robert's approach incorporates and builds on his model "six logical levels of change and alignment." Overall, this book gives NLP practitioners a very useful tool to make a significant contribution. It would indeed be desirable if more NLP thought leaders devoted attention to this subject. To paraphrase Robert Dilts: it is only through the work of leaders that we can create a world to which all of us would want to belong!

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