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# Nature or Nurture: Leadership as a Learned Trait vs. Leadership Inheritance

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# Nature or Nurture: Leadership as a Learned Trait vs. Leadership Inheritance

## **Abstract**

"If leadership is developed vs. an inherited trait, what should one focus on to expand their expertise in developing as a leader and in guiding other leaders?"

Posting about developing leadership skills from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/nature-or-nurture-leadership-as-a-learned-trait-vs-leadership-inheritance/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, nature and nurture, leadership, skills, personality, self-control

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

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Eric Forseth

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Are leaders born through genetic dispositions or are leaders developed? This nature vs. nurture debate has been present for centuries. Personally, I'm persuaded towards the value-based theory of nurture and mentoring. If leadership is developed vs. an inherited trait, what should one focus on to expand their expertise in developing as a leader and in guiding other leaders? Through the past years, the below themes have been invaluable in fostering leadership expertise. Here is the summary of these resources for potentially developing your leadership expertise.

**Be Humble** The Greek translation of humility is 'gentle or mild.' Leaders living out self-control with a gentle and graceful approach find a way to "move from dependence on their own gifts and abilities to genuine dependence upon God."<sup>1</sup>

**Develop Sound Habits** You are not just what you think. Jamie Smith's book highlights the development of sound 'heart' habits. "The reminder for us is this: If the heart is like a compass, an erotic homing device, then we need to (regularly) calibrate our hearts, turning them to be directed to the Creator, our magnetic north."<sup>2</sup> If one's heart strives for fame, then this inappropriate yearning of the heart inhibits leadership capacity.

**Soft Skills Enhance Expertise** Strong interpersonal skills compliment cognitive leadership abilities. Goleman cites the reason certain individuals don't achieve their full potential is because of emotional incompetence.<sup>3</sup> Seek out mentors who can help you control emotions, further develop a sense of humor, and avoid cynicism in your leadership practices.

**Respect Others** How you say something is just as important as what you say. We have been created in God's image. It is important to find a way to remain in conversation and "honor and regard another person's humanity." Staying in conversation gracefully can be accomplished by acknowledging we need to offer the prayer, "Lord, help me to forgive those who sin differently than I."<sup>4</sup>

**Listen Intently** Steven Sample, past USC president, encourages leaders to withhold their opinion for as long as you can to enhance decision making skills. Part of this withholding an opinion is being a good listener. Sample suggests that we should, "listen first, talk later, and when you listen, do so artfully."<sup>5</sup>

**Be a Student of Culture** Moving from leading one's self to leading others involves the necessity of understanding and supporting organizational values.<sup>6</sup> Study organizational values and culture and learn to either adopt these values or work elsewhere.

**Be Mission and Strength Focused** Donald Clifton, architect of the Gallup Strength Finder, suggests leaders find a way to be mission-centric and utilize their 'gifted' strengths.<sup>7</sup> God has gifted each leader uniquely and we need to acknowledge the value of helping individuals utilize their strengths to contribute at higher levels.

**Be Vulnerable** Learn to ask others to help shore up your weaknesses and be willing to admit mistakes. If you act invulnerable, trust erodes quickly.<sup>8</sup>

**Network** Most people enjoy the familiar. Be cautious about constantly engaging the same individuals. Go to lunch with someone you want to get to know on a personal basis. Seeking out new peers is a must for leadership development.<sup>9</sup>

**Be Bold** Ortberg challenges leaders to recognize 'situation avoidance' as the Jonah Complex. Trying to stay away from Ninevah doesn't solve the importance of 'stepping out' as a leader.<sup>10</sup> Have courage but avoid overconfidence.

**Be Solution Orientated** An impactful mentor challenged me to "not pay too much attention to praise or criticism." He further stated "Understanding, not agreement is the key for a leader in conflict management."<sup>11</sup>

**Be Multi-Framed** Bolman and Deal penned a resource that highlights structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. Seek to better understand these frames and expand your expertise in multi-frame decisions and practices.<sup>12</sup>

**Be A Continuous Learner** Ron Price credits Charlie Jones for highlighting "we are the same person we were five years ago except for the books we read and the people we meet."<sup>13</sup> Challenge yourself to gain expertise through continuous learning.

**Choose Significance vs. Success** Practice altruistic egoism "which means gaining personal satisfaction by helping others."<sup>14</sup>

**Bias Towards Action** Andrew Grove mentions leaders recognize when you are at a 'critical inflection point.' He described the perils of a "taillight strategy" that illustrated being a timely mover with key initiatives is better than being a follower. As you lead, act early with a bias towards action.<sup>15</sup>

**Shepherd (Mentor) Others** Nouwen astutely emphasized that leaders are shepherds within community and leadership is a "communal experience and a mutual experience that involves confession and forgiveness."<sup>16</sup> Practice both.

**Be Civil** Richard Mouw challenges leaders to 'initiate divine character' by demonstrating civility in the public square. Mouw asserts the living out of civility is by demonstrating kindness and gentleness.<sup>17</sup>

**Be Calm** Taking time can improve the quality of a decision. Cohen guides leaders to remain calm vs. overreacting with this quip "Fretting and fussing is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do but it gets you nowhere."<sup>18</sup>

**Stay Positive** Zig Zigler was so positive that he always brought tartar sauce when he went fishing. Goldsmith reinforced that leaders with a positive locus of control stay positive and "avoid negativity, the most basic form of bad manners."<sup>19</sup>

**Honor God** Leaders seek to learn His will for their lives. Palmen shared honoring God involves "building one's life on principles that conform to the Bible to withstand the storms of life's worst trials."<sup>20</sup>

**Engage Culture** Leaders re-direct culture. Briner calls leaders to engage the arts in television, film, and culture shaping careers. Leaders expand influence by demonstrating excellence in culture influencing professions.<sup>21</sup>

**Be Disciplined** Hybels points out that relational, physical, financial, and spiritual health is possible by demonstrating delayed gratification. Principled centered advanced decision making helps disciplined leaders resist compromise.<sup>22</sup>

**Be Focused** Richard Kette served in the same job for 52 years. His favorite saying was, "the journey is the destination." This leader lived out exponential leadership because he remained focused and 'bloomed wherever he was planted.'<sup>23</sup>

As you lead, find fulfillment by investing in your leadership development expertise. Be sure to lead well in the journey versus over-focusing on the end results of your leadership destination. Consider what other resources you should access to cultivate your leadership expertise.