

Can Leadership Be Learned?

by Tamim Ansary

Certainly leadership can be taught, says Thomas Cronin. And he should know: He taught the subject for many years as a professor of political science at Colorado College. "You're not born to be a leader any more than you're born to be an architect or a doctor," says Cronin.

Most of our political leaders, for example, have received extensive leadership training, even though we may not think of it as such. "In fact, training for political leadership is very much like training to be a doctor. You might go to law school first to get the informational base, then do an internship by assisting a congressperson or some such; then you might run for a small office, which is like a residency--and in the process of all this, you learn things like accountability, like compromise, like how to build coalitions--a whole range of skills."

"Of course genetics plays a part, too. Most people are not cut out for leadership, because they abhor conflict. They run from conflict, but leaders have to confront conflict, move to it, engage with it, handle it, use it." What you're born with will not make you a leader, Cronin says, unless it's developed. That's what schools can do. "West Point is a leadership training institute. They say, Give us four years and we'll give you a general. It doesn't happen overnight, but it happens. When you get an MBA, you're going to a finishing school for leadership." True. But students who go to West Point see a general inside themselves already. Those who go into high-end MBA programs already have the traits of a leader--drive, ambition, a willingness to sacrifice for goals. Schooling doesn't turn them into leaders. It gives them tools to be better leaders.

All the skills converge

If we don't have medical schools, we won't have doctors, but if we don't have leadership schools, we'll still have leaders. Humans clump into groups and follow someone; that's our nature. They won't necessarily be good leaders, though. That's why society has an urgent stake in leadership training.

Such training, however, deals mostly with content. Every field has its own database of necessary information. You must know certain things to run a city, other things to run an army, still others to run a church. If you don't master the relevant data, you'll probably fail as a leader. If you do master the data, however, you're not guaranteed to succeed, because there is something mysteriously more to leadership.

In fact, Ed Everett, city manager of Redwood City (a town near San Francisco) tells me specific knowledge becomes less important as you go higher. Everett, who sees himself as a leader (rather than a manager), declared: "I don't need to know about sewage treatment, bus lines, or how to fight crime. I hire managers who know that stuff. My job is to make all the departments mesh toward something bigger. We're not just

out to run an efficient city. We aim to build a community." If Everett is right, there's finally no difference between leading a city and leading a university. At the highest level, the skills converge: Leadership is leadership.

The corporate world bristles with seminars and workshops that purport to teach this essence of leadership itself, but most of these are about management, actually, not leadership.

A leader gets many to work as one by articulating a vision that strikes a chord. All the specific mechanisms of leadership may go into this: charisma, favorable personality traits, a conducive situation. And a leader puts events into action, allowing an observer to record and measure what a leader does after the fact.

Before the fact, however, if an aspiring leader were to ask a teacher how to forge that vague milling mass of separate individuals over there into a cohesive group united by a great purpose, the answer would reside in a vision yet to be articulated.

In that sense, leadership is like poetry. Can you teach people to be poets? Sort of. You can improve their language skills, build their vocabulary, teach them about rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration, and show them great poems others have written. These will enable the poet inside them to emerge and shine--that is, if they have a poet inside them.

I'm guessing leadership study boils down to something similar. If you want to be a leader, schooling can give you the bones, flesh, and skin of leadership, but you have to bring the spirit.