

Do You Really Want to Be a Leader?

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Too many leadership scholars and executives are obsessed by a pointless question: Are leaders born, or are they made?

The answer is irrelevant.

The truth is, you do not know what you are born with until you try very hard to express it.

Aspiring executives who wish to gauge their ultimate potential, or that of others, should ask instead: What level of leadership do they aspire to? And are they willing to invest the effort and make the sacrifices required to take on the responsibilities of the position?

The most senior jobs present tasks that are massive, complex and full of conflict. The playing field and

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rules become less certain. Indeed, part of a leader's job is to shape these things.

Also, the further an executive rises, the more he or she must deal with high-caliber people who know how to get what they want, are difficult, strong-willed and have a sharp appetite for power.

Here are three questions that executives should ask themselves to assess their own leadership potential.

How far do you want to go?

To reach higher office and to fulfill its obligations, you must continuously make choices that will affect other people's money and lives. And you will be doing this in a context where other people will be competing with you for the next higher position.

It is easy to criticize the competence of those with greater responsibilities than ourselves, and even easier to fantasize about how we would do the job better.

A useful exercise: Look at your immediate boss's job and ask yourself if you could do it as well, or better—honestly. Then, stretch even fur-

ther and consider the most senior leader in your line of sight—perhaps the chief executive. Learn about what that person must deal with. Get a feel for the time, energy and capabilities required to do those jobs. What would those jobs require you to do that you can't do now, or that you don't enjoy doing? What do you enjoy now, but would have to give up?

We see too many executives who set themselves up to fail because they don't realistically assess the role they are pursuing in comparison to their true capabilities.

What are you willing to invest?

Admitting to yourself what your limitations are can be difficult. But if you want to lead, you face tough choices about how much effort you must put in and in which areas you need to grow.

Leadership certainly requires business smarts, technical capabilities and cultural sensibilities, but above all, it is about power. While this point is upsetting to some people, the brutal reality is

that whatever else a leader must do, a leader must gain, exercise and retain power. We meet too many "high potentials" who aspire to high leadership but are used to receiving rewards for being bright and creative. This breeds a sense of entitlement that is incompatible with the necessity to fight for leadership power.

While it has bad connotations for some people, the appetite for power is a necessary condition for reaching posts of high responsibility.

There will be pleasures that you must give up. Certainly, there will be implications for your personal life—raising questions not so much about balancing work and family in the short term, but about finding a sustainable mix for the long term.

Ability to lead is also about overcoming old beliefs that limit one's capacity to see in a new way and adopt new behaviors. As a leader you must take people where they have never been before—in thought and action—often against their initial preferences. Personal obstacles must be overcome as well.

How will you keep it up?

Over several decades, you need ways to keep yourself going when you are not be-

ing recognized and rewarded for your performance—and to deal with criticism, resistance, setbacks and people disliking you or what you are asking them to do.

If you envision another 10, 20 or even 30 years of leadership work, then you must find effective methods for maintaining your physical vitality, your emotional flexibility and your intellectual reach and freshness.

Many who rise to positions of leadership become more closed and set in the ways that have brought them

success so far. So periodically, senior executives must create timeouts to review where they are investing their time and energy, to ensure that they remain capable of generating new behaviors to deal with new challenges.

Leadership might be learnable. But instead of taking comfort in the idea that you can develop, wake up to the sobering realization of how difficult it will be to manage novel situations continuously and under often extreme circumstances. ■■

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