

A WEEK IN *Learning*

Maybe You're Born With It – Maybe It's Behavioral

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In 334 BC, Alexander III of Macedon led over 49,000 soldiers through one of history's most paramount and wide-ranging conquests to have ever exist. After claiming the Macedonian throne at the age of 20, Alexander sought out to conquer the world's largest kingdom at the time, the Persian Empire. The young, Greek ruler set foot with his army across over 3,000 miles of seized territory. In the midst of battles to defeat the Persian Empire, Alexander successfully conquered Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and eventually Babylon. Renowned for having never lost a battle and amassing the world's largest empire, the conqueror earned his imposing title: Alexander the Great.

There is no denying that Alexander was an intelligent, successful leader in his time (he was, after all, a personal student of Socrates – *somewhat impressive*). Despite his rumored reputation, Alexander was still able to influence his people to leave their home, travel over 3,000 miles on foot, and battle every army they encountered. So, what made this man a **leader**?

The Great Man Theory

Alexander the Great is often used as an illustration to the Great Man Theory. Thomas Carlyle's theory assumes that we have inborn characteristics that set us apart from one another, which are solely responsible for obtaining positions of power. In other words – leaders are born, not made. Carlyle's theory is said to be the earliest leadership concept to outline the understandings behind leadership. The issue with this 19th century concept is that there isn't any empirical validity to back up these direct claims. The Great Man Theory draws upon historical leaders from the past (like Alexander) who were placed into their leadership roles due to being an heir to the position.

Trait Theories

It isn't completely implausible that those in leadership roles share common characteristics. Is it true, then, that effective leaders should hold certain traits and skills for their role as a leader? Following the Great Man Theory, there was a peaked interest from researchers to study more about the traits behind successful leaders. Trait theories began to expand and focus on common characteristics, inborn or



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not, that set leaders apart from their followers. Unfortunately, there was a significant lack of validity behind these studies. Further, trait theories do not take into account various situational factors, and only centers on a set list of traits.

Behavioral Theories

With a lack of reliable research on trait theories, researchers were still hungry for understanding effective leadership. What made Martin Luther King Jr. stand out from the rest of his peer activists? Why were some of our Presidents elected for two consecutive terms by the people? Quite the opposite from trait theories, behavioral theories state that leaders can be made through learning experiences. Additionally, leaders' successes can be predicted through their observable behaviors in response to different situations.

Born or Made?

Let's fast forward to current-day research on this subject. Can leaders actually be made, or was the great Alexander destined to be handed the winning ticket into leadership? The most applicable set of studies comes from comparing genetic roles to environmental/behavioral influence with the research on twins. Various studies have consistently shown that genetics play 30% of a role in leadership components, while 70% is due to environmental/behavioral influence. Despite the consistent results, twins cannot be used as a sample to the general population – a limitation most research falls loss to.

Research aside, are we able to debunk this age-old leadership question through individual examples? I think we could all agree that Walt Disney was a successful leader, whose creations have been able to live on past his life. Walt had no parental pedigrees with wealthy businesses to work off of – and was definitely not handed a throne to him like our friend, Alexander the Great. Regardless of his upbringing and some venture failures, Walt eventually succeeded. He learned from his environment and developed through years of experience. Though, we could argue that Walt *must* have had some inborn traits that aided him along the way. Perhaps they are not the sole cause to his success, but those traits could have supported Walt's behaviors.

Maybe our answer is as simple as this: great leaders are successful because they chose to utilize their positive inborn traits to respond, adapt, and develop in their environment. Was Alexander the Great born a leader? Probably not. However, he could have been shaped by the influences of his father, teacher, and his followers. Your environment, the people you lead, and the way your traits appear through behaviors, is what determines your greatness.

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