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Are Leaders Born or Made?

Perspectives from the Executive Suite

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Introduction

Do you think a leader should be a hero or a negotiator? Out in front leading people or coordinating the work of the group? Destined to be a leader or developed to be a leader?

The way we think about leadership affects how we perceive the leaders around us. For instance, if we expect a leader to be a hero, we are likely to see someone who takes charge to save the day as a good leader and someone who asks everyone's opinions and lets the group make decisions as weak. Alternatively, if we think a leader should be collaborative and focused on making sure decisions arise from the group, we would view someone who is directive as aggressive or a tyrant.

In the same way, **our beliefs about how people become leaders affect how we evaluate people's leadership potential.** Believing people are born leaders is likely to result in a focus more on selection (identify the right people) rather than on development (develop the people you get). On the other hand, believing that people are made into leaders by their experiences would be more likely to result in a greater focus on making sure people had the right opportunities to develop into leaders.

Consider United States Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's description of how he picked law clerks, during a discussion at the American University Washington College of Law on April 24, 2009: "I'm going to be picking from the law schools that basically are the hardest to get into. They admit the best and the brightest, and they



may not teach very well, but you can't make a sow's ear out of a silk purse."¹ He appears to believe that development is less important than innate talent, expecting a few to rise to the top – not even bothering with those who on the surface appear to not have "the right stuff."

Understanding whether people in your organization think leaders are born or made is critical because these attitudes play out in recruiting, promotion and development decisions.

Will your organization spend its money on selecting people believed to be born leaders, or on developing people into becoming leaders? Will executives emphasize selection of talent and only invest in those who they believe have leadership potential? Or will they see value in developing talent among a broad group of people?

Top leaders set the tone for the development of others within their organization, so understanding their view can inform talent identification and development strategies.

About the Study

- 361 people who took the Center for Creative Leadership's (CCL) World Leadership Survey (WLS) answered they were at the "Top" level of their organization (Chief Executives, Operating Officers, Presidents) in 2008 (133), 2009 (77) 2010 (107) and 2011 (44, through June 30)
- The respondents were natives of 53 different countries, 64.5% US (233 people), next largest was Australia (15 people) South Africa (11), India (10), and UK (10).
- The executives were 62.9% male, 37.1% female
- Average age was 49.00 years old (SD = 9.18, range 24 - 74)
- Most (90.6%) were from the private sector
- Average hours in the work-week was 46-50 hours; average hours worked in last regular workday was 10.02.

The respondents were asked to indicate whether leaders were born or made by moving a sliding bar on a continuum. Those who thought leaders are more born (slider landed between 1 and 39), more made (61 - 100) or about equal (40 - 60) were very similar in terms of gender and age:

- More born - 69 people, 60.9% male, 49.01 years old
- More made - 189 people, 64.6% male, 50.02 years old
- Equally born and made - 103 people, 61.2% male, 47.11 years old

Are Leaders Born or Made?

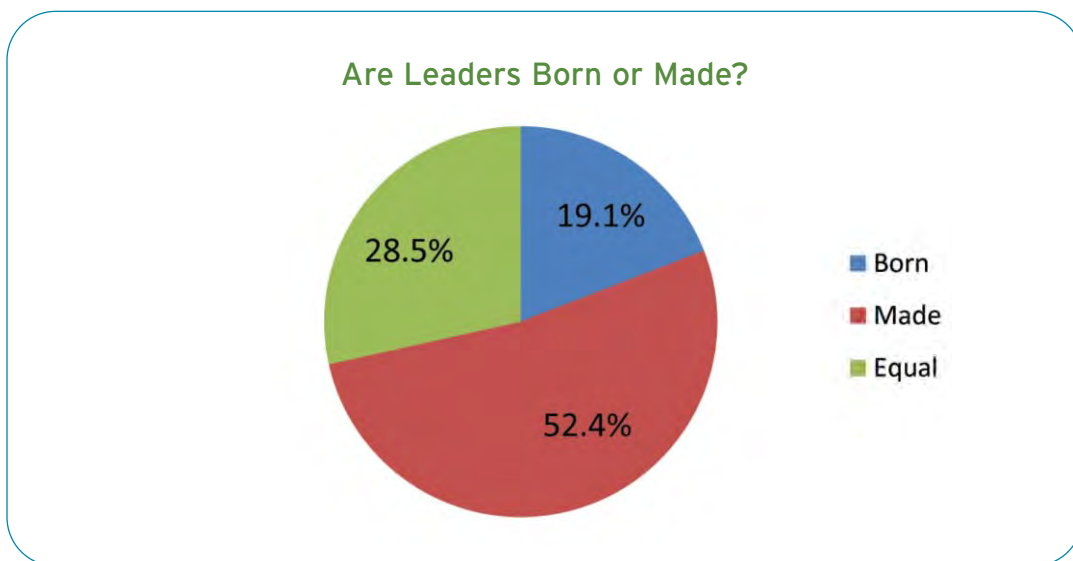
To shed light on this question, we asked 361 C-level executives (those at the top of organizations, for example, CEOs, CFOs, or Presidents) whether they thought leaders were born or made².

Their views were decidedly mixed (See Exhibit 1): 19.1% believe that leaders are more born (Born), 52.4% believe they are more made (Made), and 28.5% believe they are about equally born and made.³

This distribution of responses suggests that executives don't really agree on the answer; neither do leadership scholars – the selection vs. development debate is strong. Arguments for both sides continue to emerge.

To understand how the born vs. made beliefs may play out in organizations, we focused on the two groups on the ends of the continuum: the "Borns" and the "Mades." We compared their responses with regard to a variety of leadership topics.

Exhibit 1



The Importance of Development

We asked the C-level executives what they think are the most important elements that create a leader: traits, experiences, or training?

Mades believe that experiences are more important in creating a leader than are either traits or training (experiences=46%, training = 34%; traits = 20%; see Exhibit 2). In contrast, Borns believe that traits (41%) and

experiences (38%) are about equally important, and training (21%) is about half as important as either traits or experiences. This shows that Mades think that what people learn over time is more important to their development than do Borns. At the same time, Borns (not surprisingly) place substantially more importance on traits than do Mades.

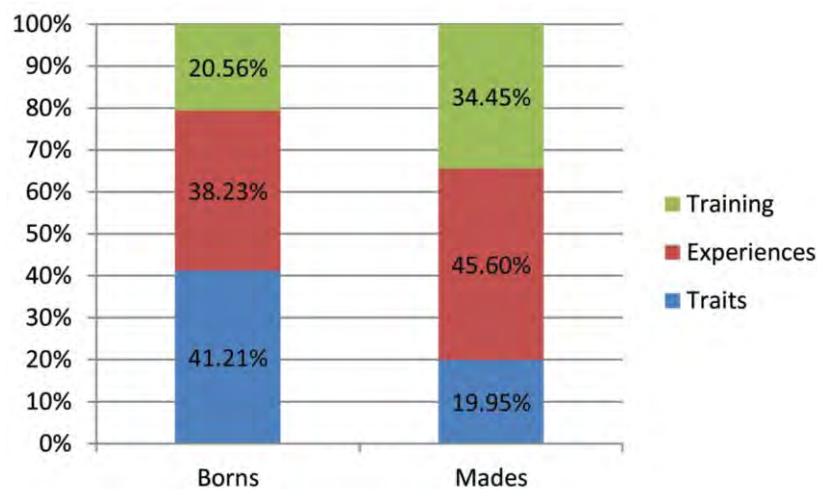
If Mades and Borns have different beliefs about what is most important in creating a leader, does that affect their beliefs about development? Are Borns less supportive of training than Mades because Borns don't think that training is particularly important?

Our results indicate that **there is little difference in how Borns or Mades at the tops of organizations feel about the availability of learning opportunities within their organizations.** Specifically, 82% of Borns and 89% of Mades believe that their organizations value employee learning and development opportunities. In addition, 84% of Borns and 82% of Mades believe that learning and developmental resources are available to them in their organizations. Apparently, even when top executives believe that leaders are more born than they are made, they also believe that learning from experiences is important for developing leaders. The difference is focus. Borns are likely to think that organizations should be very selective in who gets developmental opportunities, offering them only to those the leaders believe are most likely to benefit from them.

Exhibit 2

"Which is most important in creating a leader: Traits; Experiences, or Training?"

Mades and Borns agree that experience is important, but Borns believe that traits are slightly more important than are experiences, while Mades believe that experiences are substantially more important than are traits.



What Good Leadership Looks Like to Borns and Mades

If Mades and Borns believe people become leaders in different ways, do they also have different beliefs about what good leadership looks like or means?

As part of this research, we asked people to tell us what they think good leadership looks like by selecting an image of leadership from 17 provided options, and choosing up to five adjectives to describe the image they chose. Four images stood out from all the images as the most popular chosen. We found that the image of leadership most frequently chosen by both Borns and Mades was the same: the Music Conductor – someone who stands in the front and directs and coordinates the work of the orchestra. The conductor isn't playing each of the instruments; instead he or she is doing what is needed to coordinate all of the musicians to play their different instruments together to make music – rather than cacophony. **Borns and Mades chose substantially the same adjectives such as “uses talents of different members effectively” and “sets direction” to describe the Music Conductor image.**

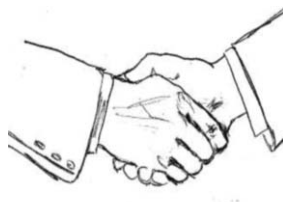


The Conductor

The three other frequently selected images were:



A Flock of Birds in Formation



Hands Shaking



Warrior on Horseback

Although Borns and Mades showed significant overlap in their choice of images, they tended to describe these three images differently. Borns were prone to pick descriptors that are leader-focused, such as the leader “leading by example” or “leading the way.” Mades tended to choose descriptors that are influence- or other-focused, such as the leader “inspires”, “empowers”, “acts as a mentor”, “shows integrity”, and “serves others.” This suggests that **Borns are likely to be more supportive of individual actions and more leader- or authority-focused, while Mades will be more supportive of influencing and other-focused actions.**

Is the leader-focus of Borns and the relational-focus of Mades consistent with what they think makes a good leader? Yes. Borns and Mades differed in their beliefs about whether leaders are more successful when they are authority oriented (e.g., follow protocol, hierarchical, and status-oriented)⁴. In keeping with their leader-focus, Borns were more likely than Mades to believe that formality in leaders makes them more effective (41% vs. 24%; see Exhibit 3), and were more likely to believe that leaders need to be rule-abiding to be successful (59% vs. 41%; see Exhibit 4).

While Borns and Mades both believe that pay⁵ and relationships with others⁶ should be important to leaders, Mades more than Borns think that making the world a better place, being of service to society, and contributing to humanity (altruism) should be important to leaders⁷. This result is consistent with Mades being more other-focused than are Borns.

Does this difference in focus extend to what they think leaders should do? Not really. We asked the C-level executives to respond to questions about how leaders should be and behave, and found that Borns and Mades both believe that leaders should be:

- **Participative** (e.g., collaborative, inclusive, and involving others)⁸.
- **Team Oriented** (e.g., encouraging collaboration and team unity)⁹.
- **Charismatic** (e.g., inspirational, visionary, and wanting to strive for excellence)¹⁰.
- **Humane Oriented** (e.g., compassionate, generous, and sympathetic)¹¹.

We also found that:

- Borns and Mades are ambivalent about whether they think leaders should behave Autonomously (e.g., be independent, self-reliant, self-sufficient, and individualistic)¹².
- Borns and Mades both believe that leaders should not engage in Face Saving behaviors (e.g., being evasive and indirect)¹³.

Understanding Preferences

Understanding how top-level leaders believe people become leaders can help you to be more effective in how you work with those leaders and how you lead within the organization.

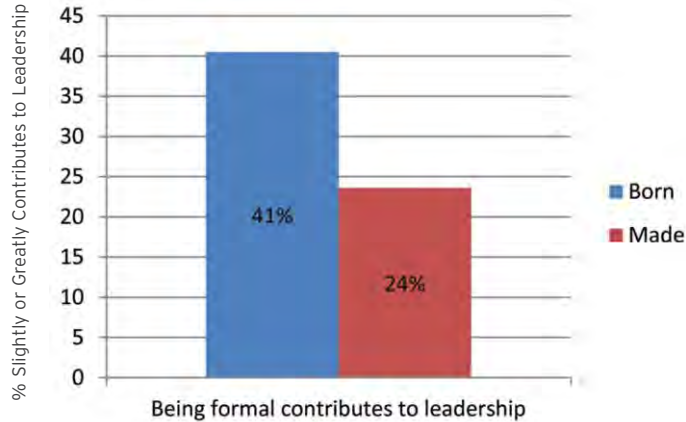
If top managers think that leaders are more born than they are made, those executives may embrace a dominant and authority-focused approach to leadership. Asking for many opinions, deflecting authority, or seeking consensus may be interpreted as weak or ineffective leadership.

On the other hand, if you are working in an organization where C-level executives believe that leaders are more made than they are born, those executives may believe that a more collaborative approach is most successful. Being dominant and focused on rules and formal leadership may be less effective with them.

In both cases, being a person who is Participative, Team Oriented, Charismatic, and Humane Oriented is likely to be viewed positively and contribute to your success as a leader.

Exhibit 3

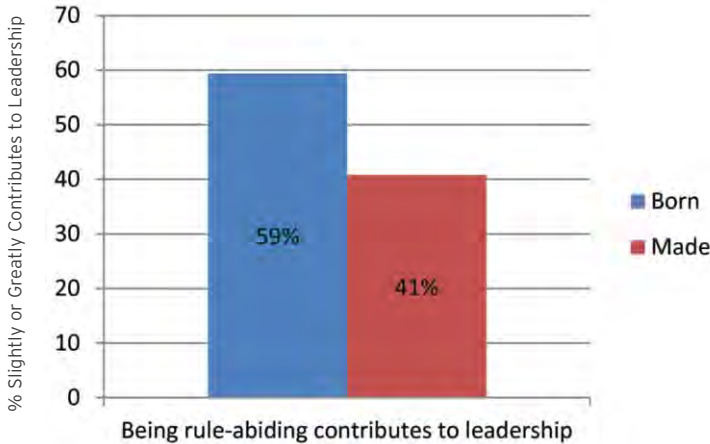
“How much does being formal* contribute to leadership?”



*Following protocol and traditional ways of behaving according to status and position

Exhibit 4

“How much does being rule-abiding* contribute to leadership?”



*Acts in strict accordance with established practices, guidelines, and conventions

Improving the Leadership Pipeline

Regardless of whether you have a born or made perspective on leadership, you can continue to improve your organization's leadership bench strength by providing people with access to varied developmental experiences. **When you make sure that people have adequate access to developmental experiences, coaching, mentoring, training, and other leadership experiences, they have the opportunity to learn and become better leaders.** Whether these experiences draw out and boost natural ability or create new leadership skills may be debated – but either way the organization benefits.

Organizations can also benefit in other ways when they provide more general support for development. Access to development has been shown to increase employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance.¹⁴

If you are in a role that includes persuading others to invest in training or other developmental opportunities, it helps to know whether those people are Borns or Mades, or somewhere in the middle. This insight allows you to frame the case for investing money and time in training and development. For instance, if your CEO believes leaders are born rather than made, you might argue that early identification programs in combination with on-the-job stretch assignments would be valuable in developing everyone as much as possible. Look for examples and evidence that strategic selection coupled with effective development is a more effective approach to improving your leadership benchstrength than is selection alone.

On the other hand, if your CEO believes that leaders are made rather than born, a broad-based leadership development strategy may be well received. You'll want to be sure that opportunities for leadership development are more inclusive. By providing a larger portion of the organization access to development opportunities, a wider pool of people will have the chance to work hard, build skills, gain experience and exposure, and improve.



Conclusion

As long as there are leaders, people are going to wonder whether they were born to be leaders or made into leaders.

All groups overwhelmingly agree that people become leaders in large part as a result of experiences that help them learn how to be a leader.

Even Justice Scalia, who said he would not hire a clerk who isn't from a top school, acknowledged that some people can develop to be as good as – or better than – their peers who appear to have more innate talent. "One of my former clerks whom I am the most proud of now sits on the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati," the justice said, referring to Judge Jeffrey S. Sutton. Justice Scalia explained that Mr. Sutton had been hired by Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. After Powell's retirement, Sutton helped out in Justice Scalia's chambers. "I wouldn't have hired Jeff Sutton. For God's sake, he went to Ohio State!" Justice Scalia said. "And he's one of the very best law clerks I ever had."¹⁵

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William A. Gentry, Ph.D., is currently a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), and coordinator of internships and postdocs at CCL. His research interests are in multisource (360) research, survey development and analysis, leadership and leadership development across cultures, mentoring, managerial derailment, multilevel measurement, and in the area of organizational politics and political skill in the workplace. He also studies nonverbal behavior and its application to effective leadership and communication, particularly in political debates.



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Endnotes

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/12/us/12bar.html>

² We asked “Are Leaders Born or Made” and participants saw the word “Born” on one end of a continuum, and “Made” on the other end. Participants then moved a sliding bar to the point that approximated their answer.

³ The groups are very similar in terms of gender and age, showing that there are no obvious demographic differences between the groups from the start.

⁴ Born mean = 2.91, SD = .76; Made mean = 2.57, SD = .78, $t(160) = 2.34$, $p < .05$.

⁵ Born mean = 2.96, SD = .75; Made mean = 2.78, SD = .87, no significant difference between the two groups.

⁶ Born mean = 3.39, SD = .87; Made mean = 3.54, SD = .84, no significant difference between the two groups.

⁷ Born mean = 3.37, SD = 1.02; Made mean = 3.69, SD = .87, $t(256) = 2.49$, $p < .05$.

⁸ Born mean = 4.60, SD = .41; Made mean = 4.65, SD = .36, no significant difference between the two groups.

⁹ Born mean = 4.59, SD = .44; Made mean = 4.72, SD = .32, Mades slightly higher than Borns, $t(160) = 2.00$, $p < .05$.

¹⁰ Born mean = 4.79, SD = .25; Made mean = 4.80, SD = .28, no significant difference between the two groups.

¹¹ Born mean = 4.24, SD = .58; Made mean = 4.41, SD = .45, no significant difference between the two groups.

¹² Born mean = 2.76, SD = .78; Made mean = 2.79, SD = .82, no significant difference between the two groups.

¹³ Born mean = 2.36, SD = .71; Made mean = 2.41, SD = .65, no significant difference between the two groups.

¹⁴ Rhoades, L., & Eisenberger, R. (2002). Perceived organizational support: A review of the literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 698-714.

¹⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/12/us/12bar.html>

About the Center for Creative Leadership



The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) is a top-ranked, global provider of executive education that accelerates strategy and business results by unlocking the leadership potential of individuals and organizations. Founded in 1970 as a nonprofit educational institution focused exclusively on leadership education and research, CCL helps clients worldwide cultivate creative leadership – the capacity to achieve more than imagined by thinking and acting beyond boundaries – through an array of programs, products and other services. Ranked among the world’s Top 10 providers of executive education by *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* and the *Financial Times*, CCL is head-quartered in Greensboro, NC, USA with campuses in Colorado Springs, CO; San Diego, CA; Brussels; Moscow; Singapore; India and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Its work is supported by 500 faculty members and staff.

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