

### Can Leadership Be Learned?

Having knowledge of leadership and knowing what makes one person a better practicing leader than another will not be of real use in driving performance improvement unless people are able to learn from this and change their behaviours accordingly.

Adair was probably the first to demonstrate that leadership is a trainable, transferable skill, rather than it being an exclusively inborn ability. In *Great Leaders* (1989) he suggests that,

“The common sense conclusion of this book is that leadership potential can be developed, but it does have to be there in the first place”

According to Capowski,

“Leaders are not born. Leaders are made, and they are made by effort and hard work”.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, everyone has the basic seeds of leadership within them and how these are developed and cultivated will determine whether leadership qualities develop in an individual.

It has been argued that

“more leaders have been made by accident, circumstance, sheer grit, or will than have been made by all the leadership courses put together. Leadership courses can only teach skills. They cannot teach character or vision...”<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to say that,

“The ingredients of leadership cannot be taught, however. They must be learned.”

It is argued that learning how to be a leader is a highly personal process dependent on the particular background of the individual. Leadership is about creating a compelling vision, and influencing people so that they want to follow that vision, however, it is also about ‘softer’ people skills and these need to be learnt also. People also need to learn how to lead in today’s ever-changing environment, i.e. how to empower, to facilitate change, and to challenge the status quo.

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<sup>1</sup> Capowski, Genevieve, ‘Anatomy of a Leader: Where are the Leaders of Tomorrow?’ *Management Review* (March 1994), p 12.

<sup>2</sup> Bennis (2003, p 34).

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Just as with most skills, leadership needs to be practised and refined. This requires a combination of feedback and self-knowledge to help maximise this feedback and learn effectively. As Bennis says,

“...people begin to become leaders at the moment they decide for themselves how to be.”<sup>3</sup>

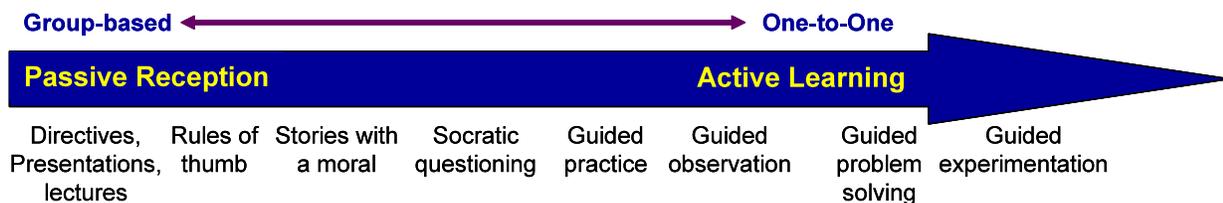
The key to unlocking leadership is learning and as Bennis and Nanus, authors of *Leaders*, found of the ninety leaders they studied they regard almost

“every false step as a learning opportunity and not the end of the world”.<sup>4</sup>

There is a range of ways to transfer knowledge within an organisation and because tacit knowledge is associated with largely uncoded know-how and know-who it can be difficult to achieve the learning needed to enable and empower others.

The real trick is to get ‘deep smarts’ (i.e. those people with an extensive experience repertoire) to transfer knowledge and according to Leonard and Swap (2004) this requires practice, observation, problem solving and experimentation to be effective. It will require a variety of approaches as illustrated below with learning by doing or active learning being the most effective transfer technique for acquiring tacit knowledge from a ‘deep smart’.

### Moving Towards Transferred Tacit Knowledge



Much of our traditional learning experience has led us to believe that we learn best by listening to experts. It would be great for us if that were the case. The reality is that effective learning, leading to increased self-awareness, changed behaviour, and the acquisition of new skills, must actively engage people in the learning process. Research demonstrates that leaders and managers, just like any other adult learners, learn more and retain more if they are actually doing or experiencing things.

A cautionary note is provided in the following observation:

<sup>3</sup> Bennis (2003, p34).

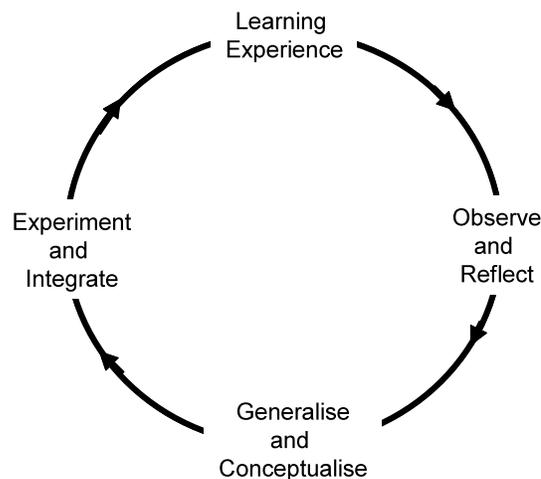
<sup>4</sup> Bennis W., and Nanus, B. (1985) *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*. New York: Harpers & Row.

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“...there is reason to believe that many individuals are not able to substantially vary their cognitive style or orientation, their dominant motives , or their global behaviour patterns (Fielder, 1967; Sherif, Sherif & Nebergale, 1965). There is no available evidence that shows that individuals can substantially alter autocratic, participative, charismatic, task-oriented or person-oriented behaviour patterns.” (Zacarro et al, 1997).

Adult learning specialist, David Kolb (1984), has described this learning process as a “learning cycle” in which the learner: (1) does something concrete or has a specific experience for which it provides a basis, (2) observes and reflects on the experience and their own response to it, (3) assimilates this learning into a conceptual framework or relates it to other concepts in the their past experience and knowledge, from which implications for action can be derived; and (4) tests and applies the learning in different situations.

### Kolb’s Learning Cycle



The adult learner assimilates useful information into their personal "experience bank" against which future-learning events will be compared and to which new concepts will be related. Unless what is learned can be applied to actual work or life situations the learning will not be effective or long lasting.

When designing leadership and management programmes it is important to apply this learning cycle to help managers understand and be able to use their new knowledge and/or skills.