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Leadership: Like Wine In A Cellar

- Aparna Sharma, Director-HR, UCB India Pvt. Ltd.)

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Does age have anything to do with being a leader? Reams have been written on the subject, but this article tries to provide a different perspective. The first question is about the qualities of a leader. Leaders need to be good at planning, initiating, monitoring and controlling, effective communication, evaluating performance, leading from the front, etc. The list can go on. More importantly, a leader needs to be involved in the business, know one's business priorities, and understand the people associated with it and the global factors that affect the business. A good leader has the ability to take tough decisions and face difficult situations.



Some believe that leaders are born with these traits. Others think that traits can be imbibed through education or that situations make leaders. For example, if a leader finds oneself in a very tough environment, the situation forces him/her to rise to the occasion.

Conventional wisdom suggests that leadership requires maturity and experience. I believe that leaders are born with personality traits that enable them to be recognised and emerge as leaders. Having said that, being born with the right traits is not enough. These need to be built upon in many ways. For example, what distinguishes one leader from another is the ability to listen and learn. A number of people are so keen to hear themselves that they are unable to pick up strands of what is being said or left unsaid. I remember meeting the Head- HR of a billion dollar MNC soon after passing out of TISS. There was no fixed agenda for the meeting although the intent was the sharing of my thoughts on an area of mutual interest. He gave me a clear 30 minutes to speak. At every point, he asked me the right questions and prodded me to share more insights. This leader must be meeting at least three people like me every day. Can you imagine the amount of learning happening?

Being a good listener has another spin-off. When one talks too much, we tend to reveal our weaknesses or how others are impacting us. Good leaders selectively reveal their weaknesses at a time of their choice. This again is a trait that can be taught.

Others believe that the variety and longevity of experiences make a leader. Businesses today are far more complex than they were ten years ago. Globalisation has compelled leaders to become aware of all possible events that could affect business. Once a manager is identified as a high-potential, companies put the person through structured short stints in various parts of the business, before moving him/her into top management. When a leader goes through difficult situations at a relatively early age, it enhances the ability to analyse every situation threadbare and take timely and balanced decisions.

Since the average age of most consumers is below 40 years, companies want senior managers to be around that age, so that their minds, and in turn products, connect with the youth. We can say that this has something to do with the era in which leaders are born.

Gender adds another dimension. A related question - do younger women make better leaders than men of the same age? Perhaps yes! It is an accepted fact that women mature earlier than men. Add Aparna Sharma (Director-HR, UCB India Pvt. Ltd.) examines the qualities and experiences that go in the making of an effective leader Leadership: Like Wine In A Cellar to that their abilities to empathise, be intuitive,

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and multitask at work and home, and they have an edge over men.

Another important development is the Internet revolution. Earlier, the abilities to learn and obtain insights were restricted to classrooms but today, the whole world is your learning ground. This needs you to learn to use technology to your advantage, and network with people across the globe. Outgoing individuals by nature would find it easier to benefit from this. In today's globalised world, the ability to deal with diversity, adapt to and relate with people of different cultures, and know a foreign language other than English, are all pluses.

Can your upbringing make you a better leader? Two qualities that any leader must possess are those for promoting teamwork as well as discipline. If your parents have, since childhood, encouraged you to share and work with your siblings, the spirit of teamwork may subconsciously be imbibed within you at a young age. Children who followed a regimented schedule grow up to have a disciplined approach to work and every aspect of life.

The last key trait to being an effective leader is the ability to self-learn.

In a nutshell, leaders surmount the age barrier. Hence, the concept of ageless leadership is critical and relevant. Those born with leadership qualities could have a headstart over others but today's world provides ample opportunities for those willing to learn.

Leadership, therefore, is a journey, not a stop. The longer one travels, the more one matures, like wine in a cellar.

Aparna Sharma is the Director-HR, UCB India Pvt. Ltd.

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