

Can Leadership be taught?

All depends on what we mean by leadership, and what we mean by teaching.

Let's start with leadership.

One definition, which I subscribe to, is *"the ability to influence others in a non-coercive way so that others choose to do what needs to be done"* and to *"stay firm on the right course"*.

Clearly this is not the only definition of leadership. Throughout history we have examples of great, famous or infamous leaders, whose primary tool was the use of fear (i.e. coercive), whether directly or indirectly. It is still today the most widely used model of leadership: carrot & stick, hierarchy, status, competition at the expense of cooperation, individual ambition over collaboration, a focus on results rather than what it takes to get them (i.e. the journey, the values...the why and the how). Leadership by fear is a favoured model if what you want is power over others and money for yourself.

However, the fact that it is the most widely used does not mean it is the most effective, either in the short term or in the long term, or indeed to resolve the global challenges we currently face. Putting a metaphorical gun against someone's head may make them do what it is you want them to do for a while, but it is not the most effective way of motivating them to do it with passion and enthusiasm.

Many companies and organizations, particularly large and multinational ones, spend time and effort trying to address the issue of leadership, values and culture. However, there is often a substantial gap between the stated values and intentions, which we often find published in their annual reports and websites, and the actual reality of day-to-day behaviours and attitudes.

The main reasons, and this may appear obvious, that leadership and values are such an increasingly important or fashionable topic for debate and scrutiny, is that the world is changing at an unprecedented rate. The challenges we face are not only global in nature, but ones which are changing the very fabric of our different societies, cultures, institutions and nations, indeed threaten the survival of humankind and the planet itself. Whether it be the challenge of population growth and demographic movement, the increasing scarcity or mismanagement of natural resources, climate change, poverty and war, the exponential growth of information and communication technologies, or the apparent failure of our political, social and spiritual institutions to address these challenges effectively, people are evermore questioning the models of leadership that have led us to where we are, and are struggling to find meaningful alternatives.

Think about this for a moment:

Truly successful organizations tend to be those who know why they do what they do.

They believe in making a difference, passionately.

The same thing occurs with individuals.

If you believe in what you do, then people who also believe in what you do will be the first to want your service or product.

Likewise the people you work with.

If they do not believe in what they do, they will work because they believe they have to.

If they do believe in what they do, they will work blood, sweat and passion, because they really want to.

It is the difference between a sense of obligation and enthusiasm.

The attitudes and results are very different.

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Clearly the underlying beliefs we hold have a major impact on the reality we forge for ourselves. A belief that competition is always better than cooperation, a belief that the end justifies the means, or a belief that killing others in the name of God or retribution is the most effective strategy for the survival of the species or the planet will have very different results than a belief in collaboration, cooperation and interdependence, and in individual responsibility, choice and integrity.

Our beliefs, the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us, are therefore fundamental in the way we choose to live our lives. Consequently, the question of which beliefs or values we choose in order to guide our behaviours and attitudes becomes more than just a luxury. Indeed our beliefs and values are critical: they will determine the world that we make for ourselves, and in which we educate our children.

I believe, based on my own experience and observation, that value-based leadership is always more effective in the long run, and especially when the going gets tough. Why? Because we are all much happier doing things we believe in, rather than doing things we don't really believe in.

What values? Primarily ones of responsibility, choice, respect, integrity, excellence and service.

Responsibility in the literal and etymological sense of one's ability to respond. Responsibility in the sense that we can always ask ourselves "what can I do about it?", as opposed to what others can do about it.

Why responsibility? Because without it there can be no effective change in behaviours or attitudes, no collaboration or cooperation. We cannot begin to solve the challenges we face until each one of us begins to realize that to be part of the solution we need to understand and accept that we are also part of the problem. If you believe there is a problem, then don't wait for someone else to solve it. Do something about it, however small or insignificant your contribution may seem.

Choice in the sense that, whether consciously or unconsciously, we always choose the attitude with which we face our circumstances, events or surroundings. Therefore we always have the choice as to how we respond to life. We all know people and have heard of many more who have overcome terrible circumstances or injuries with nothing more than courage and a positive attitude. What is it that allows them to be happy when so many people, apparently more fortunate, seem to be anything but? We can choose to be a victim, or we can choose to be free. If we choose the latter, we choose responsibility.

Why choice? Because choice is a question of responsibility, and responsibility a question of choice. Do you want to lead your life? Or do you want to have it led?

Respect in the sense that we truly listen to and empathise with others, not because they are right or wrong, but because what they say and do is information that helps us learn more about reality (not just our little map of reality), and therefore can help us be more effective in dealing with the world around us, as well as our own interior world.

Why respect? Because it is only through respect and empathy that we begin to understand others, and that we begin to find common ground for collaboration and cooperation, rather than misunderstanding and conflict.

Integrity in the sense of honesty, first with one-self, and then with others. Honesty in the sense of aligning ("being integral") with our purpose and with our heart's true desires. In the sense that there should be no difference between what we believe, feel, say and do. If we repeatedly

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say one thing and do another, we undermine our self-confidence and our ability to deal effectively with life. This makes it very difficult for others to trust in you, and more importantly, even more difficult to trust in yourself.

Why integrity? Because integrity and honesty generate trust, and forms the basis on which we establish and develop meaningful and productive relationships.

Excellence in the sense of giving your 100% at any given moment. Excellence is an attitude, not a result. Why? Because you cannot give what you do not have. If you give your best, you will get the best possible result. The only time you can be excellent is here and now: so excellence is about being fully present and being increasingly self-aware.

Why excellence? Because giving the best of yourself is the only way of realizing your true potential. It leads you on the path of self-realization, and is the glue that binds one person to another. What is the difference between giving someone your 100% and loving them?

Service in the sense of giving of yourself wholeheartedly. Giving with no expectation of receiving anything in return. Giving for the good of yourself as well as of others. Based on a natural law that the more you give the more you will receive, this value helps us to focus on the journey rather than the result. The results will always come, but the results are based not just on what you do, but on why and how you do it.

Why service? Because my survival and happiness depends on your survival and happiness. We are all part of one system, and the system affects all parts, just as one part affects the whole. We are interdependent. When I serve you, I serve both you and I. The more we serve the common good, the more we all benefit.

To be effective leaders, we must first learn to lead ourselves. We always have the choice, whether we are aware of it or not, to adopt one attitude over another, to behave in one way rather than another. Even to believe one thing instead of another. Leadership is therefore, first and foremost, about leading oneself and choosing to be “responsible”: about being increasingly self-aware, so that the choices we make are aligned with our purpose and our heart’s desires. It is about setting an example, for it is only by setting an example that we can influence others. Ultimately we learn not by saying, but by doing. Leadership is not a quality, it is a process of transformation. If you ask people what they most want in life, the answer always boils down to happiness and fulfilment. How can we be happy unless we accept who we are and bring out who we are...in other words, live our dreams and purpose? If I am fulfilled, what is it that I have filled? My heart or my bank account? and what is it that I am full of? Compassion or money?

Leadership is ultimately about having the courage to follow your heart, and thereby influencing and inspiring others to do the same.

What do we mean by “teaching”?

Let’s start with 3 bold statements:

- i) You cannot teach anything to anyone, except to yourself
- ii) You cannot change anyone but yourself
- iii) You cannot motivate anyone but yourself

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These are not new ideas. Einstein and people long before him have said similar things: “*I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.*”

The key here is choice: every single one of us can choose to learn, can choose to change our beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, can choose our level of motivation.

The question of-course, is **how** do we choose to learn? How do we change ourselves? Motivate ourselves?

The how is simple and complex at the same time. Simple in that we all know deep in our hearts what the answer is. Complex in that we need to find the courage to follow our hearts. The word “courage” comes from the old French word “coeurage”, meaning to speak your heart.

“Leadership” of self or following one’s heart has several elements. These are perhaps the most critical, and are not necessarily sequential:

- *Discovery and acceptance of who you are.* To discover your purpose, your true heart’s desires. Who am I? What is it I really like doing? What is it I truly want to do in life? What makes me “happy and fulfilled”? To accept who you really are, as opposed to all those things we think family, friends, our culture and our education tells us we should, could, must or rather be. The more we try to be someone we are not really, the more we alienate ourselves from our true purpose. This leads to frustration, resentment, stress, illness, suffering and unhappiness. Discovering and accepting who you are may be easy for some, and may take time for others. Even a lifetime. But that is the journey. The fact that it may take a lifetime (or more) for some people does not mean that is **has** to. The question is whether it can be “taught”, preferably as soon as possible.
- *Awareness: Self-awareness.* An awareness that, although we are creatures of habit, steeped in routines and brought up with a series of beliefs more often than not buried in our subconscious, this does not mean we cannot change them. There are good habits and bad habits: those that help us to achieve our purpose, and those that trip us up. It might be a good idea to figure out which are which.

Human beings may have many facets and differences, some seem to “learn” faster than others, but we all behave coherently with our beliefs. In other words our habits and behaviours are the result of our feelings or thoughts, and our feelings or thoughts are the result of our beliefs. For good and for bad.

For example, if I believe a “*crisis*” is something black, red, bad or dangerous (as opposed to an opportunity), then my feelings will be ones of fear, stress and anxiety. If I feel fear, my actions will be coherent with that fear: flight, fight or paralysis.

If I become aware of my belief, then all of a sudden I become aware that I have a choice. If my belief is helpful, then why change it? However, if my belief gets in the way of my purpose and objectives, then why **not** change my belief? The moment I begin to see a crisis as an opportunity, windows of opportunity magically appear, that hitherto had not been there. Now it is up to me to open them: that is my responsibility, my choice.

You may well say that a crisis is both a danger as well as an opportunity, and that is true: the point is to be aware of both aspects, and to choose the path that is most likely to help you mitigate the danger and seize the opportunity. But if you do not

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recognize and accept the opportunity, you will simply focus on the danger, and act accordingly.

- *Action: commitment and self-discipline.* True awareness and knowledge is not a concept, it is an experience. Life has two basic energies: positive and negative, creative and destructive, active and passive, light and darkness. One cannot exist without the other. Understanding this duality, transcending it, is part of our life's purpose. Managing it in practical terms requires active commitment to one's purpose, and self-discipline. Discipline in body, mind and spirit is the principle process used throughout the ages, by leaders of men, whether religious, political, social or military, to manage fear as well as organizational performance and efficiency. In effect, the instilling of habits which over time develop comradeship, self-respect, high morale and the ability to lead and make decisions in the face of fear. Fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of death. In other words...
- *"Staying firm on the right course".* Never lose sight of your purpose: for if you are not aligned with it, you will never realize it. Life is full of demands and responsibilities. Having clear what your purpose is allows you to manage your fears more effectively and to prioritize: in other words how to choose between one demand or desire and another. Without this clarity you will always find it difficult to say no to all those demands on your time or those conflicting desires of what to do with it, whether they be unexpected events, your boss, your colleagues, your friends or your family. Each one of us has the same amount of time in a day: so if you want to manage time instead of feeling a victim of it, have clear what your purpose is. You will then be able to set relevant objectives and *stay firm on the right course*. It is very difficult to say no, unless you have a powerful "yes" in front of you. This is fundamental for leadership, but it is also fundamental for teaching.

Teaching is about teaching yourself: learning through doing, learning through experience and by allowing yourself to make mistakes.

Teaching others is about transmitting information with tools and a process (a discipline) that help students put that information into practise. It is about offering an environment and setting conditions in which people are more likely to want to participate, more likely to engage and try things out for themselves. This starts by setting an example. If the "teacher" truly believes in what he or she does, his or her passion and enthusiasm will come out and will influence others. This will help others choose a higher level of motivation. It does not mean that others will learn. They will learn only if they choose to...by putting the knowledge they acquire into practise.

So the responsibility for learning is not of the teacher, but of the student. The responsibility of the teacher is to strive for excellence, to give his or her best. Of-course the teacher can help in this process by providing opportunities and encouragement to the students, so that they take risks and make the leap from concept to practise. The teacher can then hold a mirror up to them and provide feedback as they move along the path of experience. The process of learning is a two-way street: both teacher and student can learn from each other, but only if they choose to.

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.

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So can leadership be taught?

Yes, but only if and when you are prepared to learn.

By learning in this context I mean finding the “leader” inside of us, waking “him” up and putting “him” into action. For some, this process seems to come more naturally, for most of us it requires nurturing or necessity... for others it never seems to happen at all. However, we all have the potential to lead ourselves, and we all have the potential to learn: it is a question of choice and responsibility. The key lies in a culture and an educational system designed to nurture it from an early age: whether it be the parents and role-models, the schools or local communities, the people in government or the organizations we work in.

Clearly this is the not generally the case in the world we live in today, however if we want to change the world we live in, and resolve the huge challenges we face as well as seize the wonderful opportunities at our disposal, the responsibility lies with each one of us, and starts with each one of us. As Mahatma Ghandi once said, *“Be the change you want to see in the world.”*

The learning comes through self-awareness, practise, commitment and self-discipline, not from the concepts or pearls of wisdom cast out by teachers or self-proclaimed gurus.

A good teacher, leader or Guru, will help you by offering a vision and a map to help you navigate. In other words by providing you with a meaningful objective and the tools and a process by which to learn. By asking you the right questions, and by making sure you do not confuse the map for the territory. And by practising what he or she preaches.

In that way the teacher or guru may inspire you. But only **you** can walk the journey, and only **you** can find the answers. A great teacher or guru, is not the one who seeks disciples, but rather the one who seeks to help others help themselves...to become their own masters...their own leaders.

Perhaps we should be asking the question “what is the difference between leadership and teaching?” It is my belief that the answer is “not much”.

I do believe leadership can be taught. I also believe that the vast majority of social, economic, political and educational systems we have today will require a fundamental change in paradigm in order to create the “leadership” and “teaching” I am referring to. How these paradigms can be changed, and the educational ones in particular, is the very challenge we all face. I do not have all the answers, but I have no doubt we have the answers within us: individually and collectively.

In conclusion, I think it is worth reflecting on the word guru and its often-misconstrued meaning. The word is a Sanskrit word, and is composed of two words joined together: “Gu” meaning darkness or obscurity and “Ru” meaning light or clarity. A “Gur” is a process by which light (Ru) is shed on darkness (Gu), and this process, born in the practise and disciplines of yoga, is primarily an individual and interior process: from the inside-out, not just from the outside-in. In other words, the Guru is not so much an external Teacher or Leader, and even less someone with the answer to your desires and problems. A Guru is rather the internal guide or light that is within you. The question is whether you choose to listen to that guide or choose to see the light.

Put another way, do you have the courage to follow your heart?