

What 100 Years of Research Shows About Effective Leadership

What do we actually know about effective leadership?

Published on November 20, 2009 by [Ronald E. Riggio, Ph.D.](#) in [Cutting-Edge Leadership](#)

What do we actually know about effective [leadership](#)? One hundred years of research on the topic has led to some clear answers.

[First, are leaders born or made?](#) The answer is both, but more made than born. Leadership is a complex and sophisticated social role. Although certain qualities do predispose some people to attain leadership positions and be better at leading, effective leaders actually hone their skills through experience, conscious self-development, [education](#), and training.

[Second, does leadership training work?](#) Relatively recent analyses of over 100 years of leadership training and development efforts suggests that most programs do indeed lead to some positive change. Is the change dramatic? Sometimes. Certain crucible, or trigger, events can lead to substantial improvement in leadership ability. For the most part, however, leadership development is a long-term and incremental process.

[Third, are there certain elements that all \(or most\) great leaders share?](#) We are quite sure that the theory of transformational leadership represents the very best elements of leadership. Effective leaders tend to be inspirational, visionary, and serve as positive role models for their followers. But the very best leaders also care sincerely about their followers, their well-being and their personal development. Great leaders also empower followers and encourage them to be creative and to take initiative.

[Fourth, is leadership situation specific?](#) In other words, if you are a successful leader in one area, such as at work, will you also be a successful leader in the community, or in a different company? Although this question has not been thoroughly researched, it is likely that the same transformational qualities and skills will *transfer* to other settings. The limitation, of course, is that knowledge of the particular setting, and [understanding](#) of its “culture” is required. So, a period of adjustment and learning is needed to allow the leader to use transformational abilities in the new [environment](#).

[Finally, how early in life does leadership begin to develop?](#) This is a fascinating question, and one that our current research program is exploring. There has been little longitudinal research on the early “roots” of leadership, but our initial results suggest that the foundation of leadership begins at a very early age. Encouragement from [parents](#) and teachers likely plays a very important part, as well as early exposure to a variety of social situations, and novel experiences.

What are the implications for personal leadership development? Leadership is complex, but it can be developed. We know the building blocks of leadership success, and it is clear that devoting time and energy to your personal development pays off.