

NY Times on Leadership - Can Leadership Be Taught?

By Ed Oakley

The Sunday NY Times published an interesting article, "[What Consultants May Not Know About Leadership](#)." It was actually a book review for Bill George's (former Chairman of Medtronic) new book, "[True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership](#)."

The suggestion is made that perhaps leadership cannot be taught, therefore that a lot of leadership development efforts have been a waste of time and money. The reviewer's quote was "much of the money spent on leadership development has been wasted." While this might be true, I would like to challenge some of the thinking - even though I have not yet read Mr. George's book.

All of us at [Enlightened Leadership Solutions](#) have consistently said over the years that leadership CANNOT be taught. The leadership that is already inside of us, however, CAN BE developed.

True North used an example of how Howard Schultz (Starbucks Chairman) was deeply impacted by his family experiences growing up and how much that impacted the leader he is today. I have no doubt about this. The reviewer said: "According to Mr. Schultz, the stigma of his family's experience equipped him with an ambition to succeed and helped spur him to build Starbucks into what it is today. It also drove him to pay more than the minimum wage, offer substantial health benefits and grant stock options to all his workers."

This makes total sense. I would argue, however, that he did not instantly become a good leader because of his father's accident. Ambition to succeed, yes! Clarity about how to compensate employees when that opportunity arose, yes! While these aspects have been very important to Starbucks, the leadership abilities of Mr. Schultz now reach far beyond these few elements. He has developed many strengths through the trials, tribulations and successes of Starbucks. And he has learned much from mentors he has had over the years. He continues to develop his leadership abilities.

A Vice President of Supply Chain for a Fortune 500 company walked out of an Enlightened Leadership Solutions management development session and lead a multi-country management meeting that saved over \$250,000 in that one meeting BECAUSE OF THE WAY HE RAN THAT MEETING DIFFERENTLY. That experience and those tools he used for the first time contributed to a new level of his leadership effectiveness. The essence of who that VP is was already there. That probably did not change. AND there was, and still is, an opportunity for him to continue to develop his leadership abilities to greater and greater levels.

As we see breakthroughs in performance by people at all levels of organizations, we know that we are not "teaching" them how to be leaders. We are just helping them unleash and further develop the talent they already have.

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