

## **Are First-Class Leaders Born or Made?**

**By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited**



Mahatma Gandhi

Darwin Smith

Robert Bosch

Are first-class leaders born or made?

Participants in our leadership seminars and workshops give mixed answers. Some believe that most first-class leaders are 'born', others believe that leaders are 'made', for example through a person's upbringing largely determining whether or not he or she is likely to become a great leader.

Of course, being an executive coach and trainer with a strong focus on developing excellent leaders, I'm somewhat biased to the belief that leaders are made and not born.

In order to overcome this bias, I will state a few well-known and less known examples of leaders who were outstandingly successful.

### **Mahatma Gandhi, leader of India's independence movement**

*"As a young man, Mahatma Gandhi was excruciatingly shy and fearful. He mentions how ashamed he felt that his young wife had no fear of serpents and ghosts and could go anywhere in the dark while 'darkness was a terror for me.'*

*At his first very routine court case as a British-trained lawyer, he stood up to cross-examine but was so nervous, he could not speak and had to leave the room in total embarrassment."* [Source: *The Olympian*, by Ron Davies]

Does this sound like a born leader to you?

## **Darwin Smith, CEO of Kimberley Clark for over 20 years**

When Darwin Smith was appointed to be the new CEO of Kimberley Clark in 1971, one of the board members told him that he lacked some qualification for the job.

At that time, Kimberley Clark, maker of Kleenex and other personal-use paper products, was a very mediocre paper manufacturer. What followed under Smith's leadership was an impressive transformation of Kimberley Clark to become the world's largest paper based consumer products company, even topping Procter & Gamble.

As Smith was ending two decades at the helm of Kimberly-Clark, he was asked what had driven him, what had he done to make his company so successful over time.

In the book "Good to Great" by Jim Collins, Smith reflects, "I was just trying to become qualified for the job."

Obviously, Darwin Smith realized that continuous learning was key to his enormous success as a senior leader.

## **Robert Bosch, Founder of Robert Bosch GmbH**

In 1886, a 25 year old man by the name of Robert Bosch founded a company. This company was to face several near bankruptcies over the following 10 years or so. Sounds like a born leader to you?

The many years of oftentimes painful learning would later pay-off. Robert Bosch lead his company to international fame. Today the company has over 260,000 employees worldwide.

What all these three leaders have in common is that they all had to overcome major adversities.

For example, Mahatma Ghandi experienced massive humiliations and suppression in both South-Africa and India which ignited his deep desire to learn effective public speaking and to develop leadership skills.

Another commonality among the three is a deep passion for their mission.

An example is Robert Bosch's passion for his mission to prove that a company need not harshly exploit workers in order to grow successfully. He was known to have fought injustices against industrial workers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## **What about talent?**

There is a saying that success is made of 10% talent and 90% sweat.

Research on top sports people show that many of them actually have suboptimal physical preconditions (such as bone structure, joint geometry, etc.) but have developed effective strategies to overcome such weaknesses.

Based on my research and experience, I strongly believe that certain leadership talent is merely a starting condition, but not the cause for great leadership. Mediocre leadership talent combined with hard work and extensive learning certainly leads to more effective leadership than great leadership talent with no significant learning.

This seems to be true not only for leadership but for pretty much any discipline, be it in sports, music or management.

Let me close by quoting one of the most successful football coaches in US history:

*"Leaders aren't born, they are made.  
And they are made just like anything else, through hard work. And that's  
the price we'll have to pay to achieve that goal, or any goal."*

- Vincent Lombardi

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Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming excellent leaders for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of over 100 articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" ( see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm> ) which got published in August 2005. Charlie's articles got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive and CareerTimes.

Charlie is a founding member and President (2007/08) of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community.

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