

## Leaders are Born, Not Made . . . and Other Popular Myths

With the energy industry more challenging and competitive than ever, “business as usual” is unlikely to yield survival, much less success. Many forward-thinking companies recognize that whatever it takes to continue thriving, growing, and achieving is in the hands of its leaders. In this dynamic marketplace, powerful and effective leadership is required not only in the boardroom, but also on the front line and everywhere in between. The critical challenge remains how to generate effective leaders and encourage bold leadership.

Dispelling three of the most popular mistaken beliefs about leadership might be the first step toward a new insight into empowering and developing leaders at all levels of an organization. Real-life examples of oil and gas companies that were able to do so include a new oil company achieving substantial success on its first project, another achieving sanction in a highly competitive environment by significantly lowering project costs, and another company delivering first oil 4 months ahead of schedule.

### MYTH #1: Leaders are born, not made.

A commonly held view is that people either “have what it takes” to be a leader or they don’t. Although sufficient evidence supports this view, it leaves companies essentially playing the needle-in-a-haystack game, searching for the “right people” with the “right characteristics.” While justifying existing assumptions about what is needed for success, this view also undercuts the possibility of developing people to be effective leaders. Given the pervasive need in today’s corporate world for effective leadership, can companies afford to continue being shaped or directed by this view? Realistically, no.

A different interpretation is that anyone—absolutely anyone—can be an effective leader. When people generate a compelling challenge for themselves and others—one that points toward a future not previously considered possible—a new kind of leadership becomes achievable. Rather than being a product of the right characteristics, leadership becomes a product of being passionately committed to fulfilling that challenge and that future.

While many people might not possess the knowledge and authority of a traditional leader, such limitations are no longer seen as a barrier. Actually, people gain new power and confidence through the courage and commitment required to accept a challenge that exceeds their previous experience. When the opportunity to make a difference is sufficiently compelling, people willingly risk stepping forward as a leader. Whether mundane or profound, everyone can recall a similar instance.

Leadership, therefore, might be ordinary people with extraordinary commitments who are willing to relentlessly take the necessary actions to deliver. When people believe passionately in what they are doing, and why they are doing it, they become unstoppable.

### MYTH #2: Real leaders are effective because of what they know.

Essentially, people think about the world around them in two ways. One is through what they already know, based on their past, which includes accumulated experience and expertise. The other is through what they don’t know; for those particular things that they don’t know, they seek and find the answers. For instance, an engineer might not be an expert in every aspect of geology, but can determine where to obtain that kind of information.

However, there is a third way of thinking that requires people not only to step beyond what they already know but also what they don’t know, but can easily find out. After all, if one already “knows,” what new thinking is really possible? When seeking breakthroughs, a leader must challenge what is known and inquire into what is possible beyond that. From what is possible, a leader can engage with others to invent how to achieve something new. Remember, anything people are already familiar with,

### Increasing Drilling Performance by Challenging Previous Assumptions

A company’s drilling performance ranked in the lowest quartile for a particular deepwater region. Despite internal opinions about why this state of affairs existed, such as operational or manpower issues, they were open to other observations and recommendations.

Company personnel were surprised to discover that, as with many “impossible” problems, the solution was right in front of them. Through leadership development programs, they began seeing that (1) they could do things differently from before and (2) calculated risks can be worth taking and should not always be avoided. So, the company launched a multipart initiative to leverage this new thinking.

One, managers within the company gave teams the freedom to essentially experiment, or work differently. Two, the company made a commitment to deliver wells within a specific time period without repercussion for failure. Three, company leadership sought the input and ideas from the people who were doing the physical drilling work.

Working together, management and crews challenged the tenet, “You can drill fast or have safety, but not both.” Through being open to one another’s ideas when discussing rig-floor and downhole operations, they discovered that they could, in fact, have both. Bottom line on the company’s changed thinking? They slashed drilling time in half immediately and were able to sustain that speed while maintaining top safety performance.

while useful, is limiting. An effective leader not only finds the best way to use what is known, but also knows when to set it aside.

The more that people are willing to recognize that their own thinking has limited their horizons, the more they begin to touch upon the boundaries of doing something extraordinary. In pursuing the innovation and creativity required for today's global and highly competitive business world, leaders need to develop this kind of facility, both for themselves and for the people throughout their organization.

### **MYTH #3:**

#### **Effective leadership is scarce.**

When people believe that leadership is scarce, they constantly struggle to find a sufficient supply of capable leaders. However real this challenge might seem, it can be transformed by taking the opposite view. In fact, companies around the world have discovered that they can empower leadership within every level of the organization. In this model, there is no shortage of leadership, and the question becomes, "What will unleash the untapped energy, commitment, and creativity?" Too often, many organizations simply do not tap into the potential that their people can provide. But, by shifting the perspective from scarcity to abundance, there is greater ownership, productivity, and growth.

Another access to building a leadership culture is having leaders take responsibility for developing leadership in others throughout the company. This can be accomplished through coaching and mentoring, as well as a greater willingness for current leaders to openly share what they are learning from their own most recent successes and failures.

So, leaders can emerge in an environment that fosters leadership. It's a little like, "build it and they will come." Create a culture that encourages people to make bold commitments and big promises. Then, give them the space, support, and tools to get it done.

A former President & CEO of a major international oil company said, "A defining moment came when I challenged my senior leadership with a difficult operations target. Unexpectedly, they not only accepted the challenge but volunteered to deliver some-

thing even bigger." When leaders are scarce in a company, the goal should be, "Look to your commitment to generate them."

### **Conclusion**

A leader's power and effectiveness emerges from making bold commitments, engaging others about what is possible, and creating challenges, while giving people permission to step forward and contribute. Therefore, developing people's capabilities in these areas is important to generating leadership.

How successful one is at generating effective leadership directly relates to the size of the challenge and results to which one is committed. As such, a leadership development program must equip individuals to meet significant business challenges by helping them reach beyond themselves and their previous way of working and thinking, and help them commit to achieving something truly extraordinary, even when the pathway to delivery is unclear. A successful program also must create and maintain an environment that fosters leadership. This model produces an immediate payback for a company's investment in its future leaders. Furthermore, once people have produced something extraordinary, they raise the bar for themselves.

However, this kind of leadership development must extend beyond the classroom in the form of taking on real-time business challenges and projects in which people can continuously integrate the new tools and principles they learn into key areas of their accountabilities and toward fulfillment of their company's strategy.

Effective leadership, then, is neither a product of having the right characteristics nor about having the right experience and expertise—and is abundantly available within today's organizations. In fact, it is possible to empower and develop effective leaders at all levels within an enterprise and satisfy the organizational imperative for effective leadership that is a match for a company's most critical business challenges. **JPT**

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