

“Natural Born Leaders”

I don't consistently read "USA Today," but my news clipper brought up an interview last week with Kenneth Chenault, the CEO of American Express.

I read the interview, and was struck by a few quotes on Leadership. Many of us have heard the old adage that "Leaders are born, not made."

Ordinarily, I think that old adage means that "natural born" leaders have better hair than the rest of us.

Certainly, there are traits that are passed genetically that will make someone a better "natural" leader. But where does that leave the rest of us? Are we forever condemned to never be a leader, of any kind?

Of course not. Leaders are **both** born and made.

Let's look at a few quotes from Mr. Chenault; I've put his quotations in italic, so you won't get them mixed up with my ramblings. (If you care, these quotes are taken under the fair use provision of the copyright act, which allows for small excerpts):

"There are some people who are born leaders. But the best leaders work at it day in and day out."

What? You mean we should practice being great leaders? We can learn how to be great leaders? We can grow as leaders?

You bet your booty we can – and should. Like anything else, leadership can be learned, developed, and mastered. In this instance, a "developed leader" may actually have an edge to those who may be classified as "natural born" -- some people who are good at something never refine their abilities – think of the high school athlete who lives forever on that single game-winning drive.

How do we spot a leader? Once again, Mr. Chenault has something to say; and you've read it here before:

"When we judge people in the company, one of the first questions I ask, in addition to what were the outcomes, is does this person have any followership? Because when people ask, 'Well, how do you know who's a leader?' Pretty easy: Just look at the followership."

In other words, if you want to find the leaders in a company, look to see if anyone's following him or her – and then look at the caliber of the people who are the followers. One of the most important things a great leader will do is to identify those people in a company who are the leaders – and then change the management structure to promote those leaders. And here's a hint – they aren't always the ones who are actually in positions of responsibility at present.

Can you learn to be a leader? Once again he points it out:

“So I think that leadership can be taught. It can be measured, and it needs to be focused on by all levels of management.”

Now, we come to the greatest question. Can you become a leader? Can you be taught? Will you build your skills? Do you have followers? (For what it's worth, followers usually show up **after** you make yourself worth following).

Work on yourself to become a great leader. Make yourself better, stronger, greater. It's a goal you can reach.

Are great leaders born? Of course – but they are also made.

My thanks to USA Today for the great interview with a great man.

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