

YOU ARE A LEADER

You Are a Leader by P. Seth Yelorda

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	
The Making of a Leader	5
Chapter 2	
The First Person You Lead	17
Chapter 3	
The 3 C's of Leadership	33
Chapter 4	
Discovering Your Leadership Shape	47
Chapter 5	
Fundamentals of Leadership	65
Chapter 6	
The Power of Influence	81
Chapter 7	
The Power of Collaboration	95
Chapter 8	
The Power of Conflict	111
Chapter 9	
What's Your Problem?	123
Chapter 10	
What Leadership Requires	137

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Seth's expertise lies in helping organizations clarify vision, develop leaders, and transform culture. He brings a breadth of leadership and organizational growth knowledge from his proficiency in coaching leadership teams in the vision arena, especially around organizational clarity, program alignment, and team synergy. Seth has demonstrated achievement as a strategic thinker with a unique ability to bring a group of people to a deep sense of personal ownership and passion.

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CHAPTER 1

The Making of a Leader

Do you think leaders are born or made? Born Made **Circle one**

What do Martin Luther King Jr., Adolf Hitler, Mother Teresa, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Saddam Hussein all have in common? If you're unfamiliar with any of these names, a quick Google search will reveal that over the last 75 years, each of them has played a significant role in history. Martin Luther King Jr. was the civil rights leader who fought for the rights and equality of African Americans. Adolf Hitler was a German leader of the Nazi party and led his country into World War II, where he killed roughly six million Jews during what we call the Holocaust. Mother Teresa was a Catholic nun who dedicated her life to caring for those in the slums of Calcutta, India. Ruth Bader Ginsburg was the second woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court and was a leading voice for gender equality and women's rights. Lastly, Saddam Hussein was the Iraqi dictator responsible for the invasion of Kuwait and the death of over 250,000 of his people.

But the question is, what do each of them have in common? Although there are stark differences between them, the one common thread is that they all were leaders. Yes! Adolf Hitler, who was responsible for the death of over six million Jews, was by definition a leader. Not because of his morals or ethics, but because of his uncanny ability to influence people. Even if it meant influencing them to commit atrocities such as the Holocaust. Similarly, Saddam Hussein, with his lack of care and compassion for the citizens of his own country, was by definition a leader. He, too, influenced an entire nation to follow him, though it was to their detriment.

Without considering the quality of the leader (i.e., good or bad, moral or evil), let's look briefly at what leadership is. John Maxwell defines leadership as the ability to influence people. Even if they influence people to do negative or harmful things, yes, that means even that bully in your school who people follow and listen to is a leader. This is because leadership at its core is the ability to get people to follow you. Or said differently, if people are following you, you are a leader. So, in this case, Hitler was a leader. Saddam was a leader. Just as Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg were all leaders. They are very DIFFERENT leaders, but they are leaders, nonetheless.

If we believe leadership is influence, then what's also true is that being a leader has very little to do with the position you have and more to do with what type of person you are. Unfortunately, when I was in high school, I thought leadership was only about the position. So, my school principal was a leader because he held the position of principal. And the student body president was a leader because she had the role of student body president.

Yet it must be said, and I want you to hear me loud and clear—*though it may be true that people who hold leadership positions, like your school's principal, are in fact leaders, what's equally true is that just because you hold a position, does not mean you are the leader.* This means that someone who doesn't have a formal leadership position could have more influence than someone who does. In this case, it's possible that in your high school right now, you have the student body president, who is the formal leader, but you may also have that random student in your class who is the *real* leader because they have the most influence in the room. This is simply because leadership is influence.

My goal with this book is to help you understand the basic principles of good leadership (none of that Hitler and Stalin stuff) and then help you see that you are a leader. But before we start, I have one question for you: Do you think leaders are born or made? Born Made *Circle one**

MADE NOT BORN

For most of my time during high school and college, I looked longingly at formal leadership positions, eagerly waiting for the day that I would become a leader. There was something indistinctly fascinating about leaders. They always seemed to be up front and were the first and often last person to speak. People

readily listened to and followed their directives. They often were the most popular person in the room and had highly magnetic personalities. They had a witty sense of humor but were also very smart. It was like they were always in control, in demand, and in charge.

The first leader I remember was Mr. Strawbridge, my elementary school's gym coach. At my small private school in Inkster, Michigan, Mr. Strawbridge was like a god. He was over six feet tall (which was giant like to an elementary student), was a master on the basketball court, had personality, charisma, and a booming voice that commanded attention. He had the respect and admiration of all the older students, and his office, which was connected to the gym, was the most popular hangout spot after school. In my mind, Mr. Strawbridge was larger than life, and we were all simply living in his world. At no point could I have ever imagined that I would amount to his stature and presence.

Although I had great teachers, loving parents, and many family friends who, looking back, were leaders, Mr. Strawbridge stood head and shoulders above them because he met my definition of a leader. He was tall, charismatic, commanding, popular, and in control. He was what we call a prototypical leader. This is a leader whose personality, style, and values closely align with the group or organization they associate with. He was the person that others aspired to be like, and at times, we as elementary students found ourselves even emulating him.

Do you have a Mr. Strawbridge in your life? An individual that you look up to and that embodies what you believe a great leader is? Maybe a teacher, pastor, mentor, or parent. Write their name here: _____

At the time, I didn't realize it, but my opinion of Mr. Strawbridge was shaped by my belief that individuals were born with a leadership gene. Unfortunately, it appeared as though I did not have this gene because I did not possess any of the traits I saw in Mr. Strawbridge. I've always heard the term "natural born leader" and assumed that maybe I was not born with this elusive leadership gene. That somehow, I was just destined to be a follower all my life, as though something was wrong with being a follower. Because some people were better leaders than others, I reasoned they must have been born leaders. Like comedians who are naturally funny or naturally athletic basketball players, I figured that some people were just born as leaders. It didn't cross my mind that athletes,

politicians, presidents, pastors, teachers, and even leaders aren't born that way, but it's something they've had to work on and develop.

Take for example LeBron James. During his 17-year basketball career, he has four NBA championships, four NBA Most Valuable Player (MVP) Awards, four Finals MVP Awards, and two Olympic gold medals. He holds the record for all-time playoffs points, is third in all-time points, and eighth in career assists. He clearly has natural abilities that make it possible for him to play basketball in the NBA. His height, weight, body composition, hand-eye coordination, athleticism, and intelligence all give him a better chance of making it in the NBA compared to someone who doesn't have any of these natural strengths. But once in the NBA, at least 100 other players have his same athletic ability but are not as good as him. What's the difference? Practice! In high school, he was playing pickup games with NBA players. And now, with 18 years in the league, having played over 1,200 games, and having made it to the NBA finals 10 times, he has played more minutes in the league than anyone else currently playing. This time has allowed him to practice over and over again and develop his craft more than anyone else. As a result, it allows him to perform on a level that few have ever reached.

This doesn't mean that individuals like LeBron James weren't born with specific attributes that gave him an advantage in his professional career. The fact that LeBron is 6 feet 7 inches and I am only 6 feet 1 inch gives him a clear advantage over me. However, his ability to hit game-winning shots and lead his team to the NBA finals year after year is not something he was born with. He has invested a significant amount of time, energy, and money into developing his basketball skills and I.Q. LeBron teaches us that the level of success you reach, whether it's as a leader or an NBA star, is determined more by your willingness to develop and grow than anything your parents gave you through their DNA.

The problem with thinking that leaders are born is that it implies that people can't change. It suggests that who you are fixed, static, and that growth is not possible. Your potential and success as an individual are determined by what you received from your parents and that there's nothing you can do to improve, develop, or even change your path. This theory places a genetic lid on your potential.

However, suppose you believe that leaders are made. In that case, you believe that though you may have received genetic endowments or tendencies from your parents, you also possess the ability to grow and develop far beyond what you were born with. We call these genetic endowments traits. For example, your personality, cognitive abilities, intelligence, and even your values are traits that many believe you inherited from your parents. Although these traits may be a component of your leadership, they are not the sum total of what makes you a good leader.

Your personality may be more gregarious and outgoing. As such, you may be more inclined to connect with others (a necessary component to leadership). However, a gregarious personality (i.e., also known as a trait) is not what makes someone a good leader. Or you may have high cognitive ability (i.e., intelligence), which can be a valuable component to leadership. But again, being the most intelligent person in your class won't make you a good leader. If you think that leaders have big personalities, are funny, and outgoing, you will believe that you can't be a good leader if you don't possess these traits. But this is not true.

Traits are things you are born with—personality, intelligence, and temperament. Behaviors, however, are things you do—being honest, having integrity, being open to change, fostering collaboration with your team, and having humility. These are just a few leadership behaviors that you can develop and improve on over time. Even though it may appear some can demonstrate these behaviors more naturally than others, you can still grow in these areas. Therefore, we believe great leaders are made, not born.

To further illustrate this, research has shown that only 30% of your leadership abilities (i.e., personality and intelligence) are genetic. That means 70% is from development. It's for this reason that I state with emphasis that leaders are made. We all start with a set of inherited abilities (the 30%). But through the course of development, school, and relationships, these abilities are refined, improved, and developed (the 70%). As they are refined, we come to a better understanding of who we are, our strengths, gifts, and abilities, and we begin to further develop the necessary skills to lead well.

Colin Luther Powell was raised by two parents in South Bronx, New York, in the 1940s. He wasn't born into a wealthy family and didn't go to the top schools. His father was a stock clerk in a garment shop, and his mother was a seamstress.

Throughout high school and college, he was an average kid with average grades. He had a C average throughout most of high school and college. But along the way, he decided to join the ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps). In this program, he learned the fundamentals of leadership and was trained to become a military officer. He then joined the military after college, and over roughly 30 years, he continued to grow and develop his skills. In 2000 he was promoted to be the secretary of state by President Bush. This was a significant achievement for him because he was the first African American to hold this high position in the U.S. government. He served in this position for four years before he retired. In a 1998 interview he said, "I think leaders can be shaped. You have to have the fundamental instincts for working with people. But the instinct can be improved upon through training and education... I've come across brilliant natural leaders who became even better when they developed their skills."



His life is a lesson that your success as a leader has very little to do with what you were born with. Instead, it has everything to do with how you choose to grow and develop.

KEY QUESTIONS

- *What opportunities are around you that are teaching you how to grow?*
- *Are you taking advantage of every opportunity?*

I love eating, and I hate cooking. I know this is a financially painful arrangement. I eat out entirely too much. One day while I was in college, my roommate's mother came to our house to visit. He and I had been friends for a while, so I knew his mother well and didn't think much of her visit. But on that day, I was in for a big surprise. When she walked in the door of the house, she took a quick look around and said, "I can work with this." I wasn't sure what she was referring to because the house we were renting was a bachelor pad. There were three of us living in that house, and there was absolutely no food in the refrigerator, empty pizza boxes stacked on the tables, and the trash looked and smelled like it had not been taken out for days. But she was unfazed by our living conditions.

She headed straight for the kitchen, looked through the cabinets, put a smile on her face, and went to work. I was unsure what exactly she was doing because,

because, as I said, there was ABSOLUTELY no food in that kitchen. Unless she was going to rain down manna from heaven like Moses, no meal was coming out of that place.

I resigned to turn my attention back to the video game I was playing. About 30 minutes later, I heard her say, "Lunch is ready!" I didn't want to be rude, so I decided to investigate what she meant by lunch. Maybe she had called in an order or was planning to take us out to eat. However, when I stepped into the kitchen, I beheld a full course meal. Everything from an appetizer, salad, rice, veggies, and some type of vegetarian meat, along with bread and drink, was prepared. I was dumbfounded. She made a whole meal out of ABSOLUTELY nothing. What I perceived as random useless items, she saw as the key ingredients that could be used to create a fabulous meal.

Though I did not realize it at the time, this was a profound lesson on leadership development. I was quick to conclude that a good meal could not be made from the items in my kitchen. However, someone else who was an experienced cook saw our random items for what they were, the foundation for a great meal.

When you look at your life and what you inherited from your parents, you may feel you don't have enough raw talent or natural abilities to be a great leader. But I say, yes, you inherited certain traits and personality styles from your parents that you may feel are not good enough to become a great leader. But what you gained from your parents is not the end of the story. Whether you inherited a lot or a little, what you have can be developed. It may take some time, and it will take some hard work, but you too can **rise up and lead well!**

If you view leadership as an elusive pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, you're not alone. For years I doubted my abilities to lead. I wondered if I had what it takes. Was my voice strong enough? Was my intellect sharp enough? Was my personality charismatic enough? I thought that if I could only get into a leadership position, then I would be a leader. I vividly remember walking across my college campus thinking about how when I graduate and get a real job, that's when I'll finally be a leader. Yet all my questions about leadership were based on a faulty premise. Like many of you, I thought leaders were born and that I just lacked the natural skills to lead. But that, my friends, is the furthest thing from the truth. Leaders are made.

THE RANDOM GUYS WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

What type of leader do you think is needed to change the world? Maybe you would need athletic abilities like LeBron James. Or intellectual abilities like Steve Jobs. Or even financial capacity like Bill Gates. Or perhaps a mix and blend of all three in the form of Elon Musk. No, really think about it. If you want to end world hunger, what type of leader would you have to be? Or maybe you want to dismantle the foster care system and put every child in a loving home. Who would you have to become? Or perhaps you want to end the sex trafficking industry so every boy and girl feels loved and valued by society. Who would you have to be? Or what if you want to start a movement that was one day turned into a global initiative that would last for thousands of years? What type of leader would you need to be?

So, the easy answer is you need to be like Jesus. And that's exactly who Jesus was. He was a leader that had compassion, courage, determination, intelligence, and wisdom all wrapped up in one. And with all of that, He was able to do so much. Jesus did not do it alone. Instead, He recruited other individuals who would join His core leadership team and help Him change the world.

Now, you would think that Jesus would select individuals like Him—compassionate, refined, fully developed, bold, and courageous. But He didn't. Jesus chose twelve random, uneducated, unintelligent, rough around the edges men who no one thought would be suitable for anything, certainly not changing the world.

When you look at the disciples, nothing was special or unique about them. Andrew, Peter, James, and John were fishermen. It's also believed that Thomas, Nathaniel, and Philip may have been fishermen too. Matthew was a tax collector. But by his people, he was considered a traitor because he worked for the Romans. Jews were not supposed to work for the Romans. It's like living in L.A. but cheering for the Clippers. It was something you just did not do. Simon was a radical zealot who most likely spent his time trying to overthrow the Roman Empire—good luck with that. Judas loved money and was pretty much a thief. Try explaining that profession to your significant other's parents. And the others, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, and Thaddaeus, were random. Really. No one knows what they did or what they were good at. And Jesus took these twelve men, one of which we know betrayed Him, and changed the world.

He didn't recruit them because they had any particular skill or an inherited trait that would cause them to be a dynamic team. Their success as His followers was not in their abilities, but it was in the time Jesus took to develop them. For roughly three years, they walked with Jesus. Spent every waking moment with Him. They observed His life. Saw the miracles He performed. Sat on the front row of every sermon He preached. Jesus knew that an individual's potential is not based solely on what they receive from their parents, but more on how they grow and develop as a man, as a woman, as a leader. So, He took time to develop them into the leaders He needed to lead His church forward once He was gone.

Yet by the time Jesus ascended to heaven, the development process was not complete. They still needed development. On one occasion, Paul had to pull Peter aside and tell him this is not how leaders act. Their development was a lifelong journey. It wasn't like baking a cake where once it's baked for 45 minutes, then it's done. No, leadership is not like that. Leadership development doesn't have a timer that goes off once you're done. It's a lifelong developmental process that in the disciple's case—and yours a well—was significantly aided by this little thing called the Holy Spirit.

YOUR LIFESTREAM

At this point, you may be wondering why some people just seem to be better leaders than others. Great question! As in every other arena, how good you are at something is primarily based on how much you practice. The more you practice, the better you get. But practice doesn't begin when you know that you are a leader and want to start growing. Practice actually started the day you were born and entered into your lifestream.

Ok, let me explain.

The day you were born, you entered a lifestream. A lifestream is a river that flows throughout your entire life. Like all rivers, it naturally flows downstream, and it has a clear starting point and an endpoint. Your lifestream started on the day you were born and will end on the day you die. As you journey down this river, you will have both positive and negative experiences. You will have laughter, joy, and sorrow. You will learn, grow, and get better. You will encounter individuals who will journey with you for the better half of your journey, like a

husband or wife, and you will encounter some people who will only make a brief appearance in your life. As you flow downstream, you will pass many individuals standing on the banks of your lifestream. Some will venture to wade into your river and ride the waves of life with you. Others will just wave as you pass them by. But each one of these encounters, no matter how long or brief it may be, will influence the direction and route of your river.

No two lifestreams are alike. They are shaped and determined by our family of origin, the community we are born into, and our relationships and experiences. Like your fingerprints, your lifestream is unique to who you are. When you entered your lifestream you entered with only a few attributes that you acquired from your parents. However, the person you become is primarily determined by the experiences you pick up as you float downstream. And similarly, your leadership skills and abilities are one of these things you primarily pick up along the way.

The lifestream helps us understand why it appears some individuals are better leaders than others. Because your leadership abilities are developed based on how much you practice, individuals who have practiced leadership more than others will appear to be "naturally" better at leading than others. Based on what lifestream you were born into, you may have been exposed to more leadership opportunities than someone else.

Simply put, some people started practicing leadership before others. Take, for example, my daughter. When she was five years old, she tended to order her sisters around. While her sisters view this differently, what she was doing was practicing leadership. She was discovering her voice, learning how to motivate and influence others, and establishing a framework for getting things done. With direction and guidance from her mom and me, she will continue to develop her ability to be both a good leader and follower.

So, what makes one person a better leader than another? Every individual enters a lifestream at the same point. However, the moment you enter, your river takes shape and propels you in a different direction than the next person. As the river flows, it picks up debris along the way. This debris can be in the form of relationships, habits, and experiences. This debris impacts and shapes your leadership ability. You are exposed to teachers that influence you. You have experiences that challenge you and cause you to rise to the occasion. You develop

friendships that bring out the best in you. You read books and watch movies that leave an impression on you. Each of these experiences shapes who you become and, ultimately, how well you lead.

Things you pick up in your lifestream that shape your leadership:

- Family upbringing
- Role models
- Education and training
- Dramatic life events and crisis
- Work/school experiences

For Colin Powell, his lifestream led him to the ROTC. It was there that he discovered the mentors, teachers, and structure he needed to formally begin his leadership development journey. Or consider the former President of the United States, Barack Obama. When he was born he entered into his lifestream. Being born in Hawaii to a Caucasian mother and African father immediately sent him down a particular path. Being raised by his grandmother also impacted him. He attended high school in Honolulu, and upon graduating he entered into college where he studied political science and English literature. He picked up several jobs as a researcher and writer, both of which prepared him to become the first Black president of the Harvard Law Review in 1990, eight years later. This position opened up the door for him to receive a contract to write a book, which he did five years later in 1995. After graduating from Harvard Law School, he taught law at the University of Chicago Law School, where he was involved in local politics and over the course 17 years eventually became President of the United States.

Although Colin Powell and President Obama are considered high-level leaders, they were not born leaders. They were born with a set of traits inherited from their parents, and through hard work, dedication, and practice, they developed into the leaders we know them to be today. Their lifestream lead them down a path that prepared and developed them to be the leaders we've now experienced them to be. So, if you see a leader who seems to be head and shoulders above their peers, it's not because they were born that way. Instead, it's because they started practicing leadership much earlier than others and had pivotal life experiences that shaped them into who they are today. Regardless of what you are born with, if you start practicing today, you will get better.

REFLECTION

- Do you think leaders are born or made?
- What qualities/behaviors do you think a leader should demonstrate/model?
- How closely do you reflect these behaviors?
- Do you consider yourself a leader?
- What significant experiences have you encountered on your lifestream that have helped you become a better leader?

respect you. If you cultivate it, it will bear a harvest of abundance and favor on your life. You will eat of its fruit, and all those you encounter will call you blessed. Make the decision today to do everything in your power to grow your leadership, and it will return the favor by increasing your influence and impact in this world.