Is leadership won early or earned over time?

Many motivations make a leader. We need to move beyond the “born to greatness” stereotype to embrace slow-burn communal leadership.

June 12, 2026

Someone has to make a decision. Whether it’s an important business choice or a where-to-

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go-next scenario on a Saturday night, informal groups often come to an impasse with several options on the table and no clear winner. And then someone just seems to take the lead, and others follow. That person likely displays what we commonly think of as leadership traits — assertiveness and confidence — and others perceive that person as leadership material and are happy to hand over the reins.

Yet this is only one kind of leader, the kind who actively seeks out a starring role. In research by IESE's Yih-Teen Lee, with Gouri Mohan, Dorothy R. Carter, Cynthia K. Maupin and Nathan T. Carter, the question of how leaders emerge is probed in some detail.

In studies of self-directed teams, where leadership emerges naturally, the authors discover that how a leader is chosen and valued can depend on where the team is in its life cycle. They also demonstrate that the most assertive person may not be the only good leader in the long term.

The motivations that make a leader

Shakespeare called this over four centuries ago with "some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."

Effectively, there are a few distinct "whys" that motivate a person to lead. Broadly, we can classify them as a desire to lead based one's identification with a leadership role and intrinsic desire, versus a communal motive that views leadership as a duty or service to others.

Typically, it's the confident and self-motivated people we identify with leadership traits. This is the person most likely to take over a decision unsolicited. And when teams are newly formed and people don't know one another's abilities well, actions like speaking first, taking initiative and directing conversation serve as signals of competence. What is being evaluated is whether a person *can* lead.

On the other hand, communal, "other-oriented" individuals are less concerned about the self and more about community. Their traits — including building trust, collaboration and empathy — aren't as flashy as dominance and bravura. But as a team matures, these traits often come to matter more. They are associated with warmth and, in a new finding, with competence. What is being evaluated is whether a person *should* lead.

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Leadership begets more leadership

Another quirk of leadership is that it's often the early bird who gets the worm. Early leadership impressions are highly durable, meaning that those who are seen as having potential in the early days often stay ahead of the crowd. Once recognized as leaders, they often gain structural and psychological advantages that reinforce their influence.

Tracking teams over time, the study found that driven, ambitious leaders who stepped up during a team's formation rose rapidly because they were perceived as highly competent. And those first perceptions became the lasting groundwork that helped these leaders remain leaders longer term.

However, although these leaders remained in power, they weren't necessarily the only leaders. Instead, communal leaders, driven by duty and group care, eventually received "slow recognition" as their interpersonal skills created a sense of warmth and competence. In essence: Driven leaders are born to greatness, whereas communal leaders achieve greatness or have it thrust upon them, and they are also great.

The delayed advantage of communal leadership

Past research has often promoted dominance and confidence as ideal leadership skills, but that's because it often doesn't look at the long term. It's important to remember that leadership isn't a one-time event. Even *becoming* a leader isn't a one-time event. Instead, in self-managed teams, leaders continue to evolve and emerge.

Though communal leadership is often underestimated next to assertiveness — and perhaps, not coincidentally, consists of traits often associated with women — in organizations in which collaboration is key, it's an essential profile to have on your roster.

Today's workplaces often embrace a range of work styles, including informal shared-leadership structures, agile and self-managing teams, and dynamic teaming arrangements. In such contexts, it's a serious oversight not to take advantage of leadership styles that are warm, collective and inclusive.

For organizations, the study recommends that leadership development programs:

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- recognize and support leaders arriving from all motivational pathways.
- help communally minded leaders have access to resources earlier in their careers.
- buttress self-motivated leaders with techniques to grow sustainably and avoid backlash if early expectations aren't met.

Organizations that recognize and cultivate different forms of motivation are better positioned to develop leaders who sustain healthy, effective and collaborative teams over time.

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