

Praise for *Leaders Are Born To Be Made*

“Many of the most valuable leadership lessons CEOs learn throughout their careers come from mistakes we have made along the way, the setbacks and hard-won triumphs that have helped us in our ongoing pursuit of becoming better leaders. I wish I had had Dr. Deptula’s *Leaders Are Born To Be Made* actionable steps long ago. If you’re serious about being a better leader, start here.”

—**Sam Reese, CEO, Vistage Worldwide, Inc.**

“Remember, it is ALWAYS about the people. If you don’t invest in your team, you can’t succeed. Bryan presents a methodology to build leaders who can deliver results.”

—**Bruce D. Werner, Strategic Advisor to Private Businesses,
author *Your Ownership Journey***

“Bryan Deptula’s book, *Leaders Are Born To Be Made*, succeeds where other leadership development books fail. The focus on self-leadership first is a refreshing approach to ensuring that leaders are well prepared to lead others. He demystifies the research on leadership and translates the evidence into clear guidelines. The book builds a solid foundation for improving leader-member relationships in the workplace.”

—**Terri A. Scandura, Professor of Management,
Academic Director, University of Miami**

“Dr. Deptula’s work can best be described as a leadership manifesto. His truthful and unvarnished approach to learning actionable leadership skills is revolutionary. According to Manila Recruitment, employee turnover is caused by ten reasons. At the top of the list is ‘bad bosses.’ The truth works, all the time! *Leaders Are Born To Be Made* will help trainers, mentors, leaders, and aspiring leaders address eight of the top ten reasons for leadership failure.”

—**J. Preston Jones, D.B.A.**

"*Leaders Are Born To Be Made* takes you on a journey from leadership challenges to personal resilience. Bryan sets the stage for understanding the importance of self-discovery, making this book a must-read for those seeking to lead and train others to lead effectively."

—**Chrissy Myers**, author *Reluctantly Resilient*

"Bryan Deptula's thoughtfully written book reveals fresh ideas and actions you can take to break through as an effective leader. This is a new approach to bring out the best in others, and a playbook for how to stand out as a leader, especially now."

—**Steve VanValin**, CEO and Founder, **Culturology**,
author *The Search for Meaning at Work*

"This is a wonderful read that draws on leadership research and blends the author's personal experiences and development as a leader with the provision of practical strategies to develop your leadership potential. He starts with the problem—assuming we can lead with limited development—and shares how this can impact your leadership. The storytelling woven throughout the book achieves the aim of meeting each reader somewhere in their own personal journey, to deliver 'aha' moments of insight. Even a skeptic will find nuggets of truth and even enlightenment. The strategies provided are thought-provoking and useful for self-development and coaching alike. Two statements in the book stood out for me that I will address immediately in my leadership:

'I will make it one of my goals to impact positively every person with whom I engage.'

'If you're the only person who knows and understands your purpose for leading, you haven't given anyone a reason to follow you.'

Bravo Bryan! The journey continues."

—**Ethlyn Williams, PhD**

LEADERS

ARE BORN

TO BE MADE

Practical wisdom from scientific journals on applied psychology, leadership, and organizational behavior

**Proven Low-Risk, High-Reward
Ways To Make Executives And
Managers Better Leaders**

BRYAN DEPTULA, MBA, PHD



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PREFACE

Why You Should Read This Book

Ah. Ah. Choo. The sneeze that changed everything.

The sound reverberated through the bar like a gunshot, freezing time itself. Isabella's sneeze exploded across our tiny table; a microscopic missile launch that sent us all diving for cover. Saliva droplets arced through the air like deadly comets. Everyone at the table contorted their bodies to avoid the deadly spittle.

November 2020. Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. COVID-19 pandemic in full effect. The world had become a place where a single sneeze could end lives, shutter businesses, and tear families apart.

As Isabella's face drained of color, her trembling hands clutching her phone, she announced a damning COVID-19-positive test result. Panic filled the hearts and minds of everyone at the table. Prior to that moment, my wife Kristen and I had done everything possible to avoid catching COVID-19.

Months of social isolation and staying six feet away from all other humans apart from immediate family, a wasted effort. Now, in a predictable but unanticipated event, my friend Isabella had sneezed directly into my face. Fear. Anxiety. Holy shit.

"Kristen," I choked out, "I've been exposed. I need to quarantine." With the contents of my mobile quarantine unit in my possession, I set up my tent on the frozen ground of the Indian River Inlet Bridge campground.

And so began my exile. Five nights of bone-chilling cold and soul-crushing isolation, followed by nine more nights in a sterile condo. Fourteen days to contemplate how I, Dr. Bryan

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Deptula—once a globe-trotting leadership expert and new hotel owner—found myself sleeping under a bridge.

Just over a year before, in September 2019, Kristen and I had taken the biggest gamble of our lives, emptied our savings, leveraged our every asset, and accepted a “gift” from my mother to purchase the Canalside Inn. It was our dream to buy a hotel, convert it into a retreat center, and give me a platform to do the work God put me on this planet to do...pull the leader out from within every human being. I would deliver life-changing leadership workshops for companies and to the public. Guests would stay in our lodging rooms at night, take my courses and workshops in the day, and do team-building activities.

How could we have known that just months later, in early 2020, news of COVID-19 would cause the world to grind to a halt? The sudden pandemic and lockdown were a major blow to our business. We explored options for virtual conferences and online workshops, but companies weren't investing in leader development programs and people were literally banned from traveling. On April 6, 2020, the State of Delaware placed “Bans all short-term rental units—including vacation home rentals, hotels, motels, and condo rentals...” meaning that no guests except first responders and medical staff were permitted at any lodging facility.

As a couple, we were terrified that the risk we had taken would result in bankruptcy. We struggled to cope with the financial and emotional toll of the lockdown. The stress of operating our multimillion-dollar investment with no money, empty seminar rooms, deserted guest accommodations, and no end in sight to the lockdown made me want to throw up.

As I sat in that tent, freezing my ass off, mad at the world, I wondered how my life had led me to this moment. Early in 2019, life was “good” and going according to plan, and the

world seemed “normal.” In those days, I could use all the knowledge, skills, and abilities that I had acquired over my years of earning a Master of Business Administration (MBA) and a doctor of philosophy (PhD) in leadership and organizational behavior, and all my experience being a corporate trainer, executive, and professor to teach people everything I “knew” about how to be a leader. I had just been promoted to associate professor at Nova Southeastern University (NSU) and had also been nominated to—and accepted—the role of acting department chair for the Management Department in the College of Business. If that weren’t enough, we were operating our leader development company, BKD Leaders, with much success. I was traveling around the country speaking to large crowds at packed conferences and corporate headquarters. I was speaking so much that I’d often call Kristen to ask what city I had woken up in and who the audience was for the day. It was common for me to be in front of a thousand people a month between my university graduate students, corporate clients, and conferences.

Looking in front of me at whitecaps atop the waves crashing on the beach, I reflected on my present circumstances, how the conditions of the world had forced me to lead our team of employees in ways that were new—as in how do you staff a hotel with a front desk person who is supposed to be the first point of contact with guests, when guests now demanded a “contactless experience?” How can we leverage technology to operate our hotel remotely—without being in person to greet guests—while maintaining the same level of customer satisfaction? How can we possibly meet the legal requirements and constantly changing health recommendations, while trying to accommodate one guest who wants us to sterilize every surface and wear masks behind a plastic barrier, when

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another guest comes in with no mask and close-talks every person in the lobby? It was on me to find solutions and lead in ways that I had never thought of. Here I was, a literal academic researcher and corporate trainer, at my wit's end about how to lead, utterly confused about what to do and how to do it. Somehow, after all that schooling and all the years as an executive, I was learning to lead again for the first time.

As I huddled in that tent, a revelation struck me: Everyone was learning to lead again, because everything we knew about leadership had to be applied in ways that we never imagined. Nobody knew what they were doing. We're all in this clusterfuck together, so we'd better figure out how to live and lead better such that we might get ourselves as expeditiously as possible back to a (new) normal.

The pandemic wasn't just a health crisis; it was a workplace transformation. Executives, once the masters of their corporate domains, were now adrift in the uncharted waters of remote work. Their once-unshakeable egos, mine included, gave way to a profound fear as they grappled with the unfamiliar challenges of leading virtual teams. Trust in leaders, governments, coworkers, and teammates eroded, productivity vanished, and once-solid businesses went out of business.

The pandemic only accelerated an already-in-progress work-from-home remote revolution. Leaders were forced to accept that some jobs required people to be in person, while other jobs be done from anywhere in the world. Leading in person as opposed to remotely requires different skill sets. Leadership fundamentals didn't need to change, only how you applied those skills—and through which medium you communicated—shifted like tectonic plates.

It's impossible to lead a team scattered across the globe using the same old-school prepandemic style, because if you

do, you are begging for underperformance, resentment, and employee exodus. Companies clinging to traditional hierarchical structures and authoritarian leadership styles were significantly more likely to experience employee burnout, disengagement, and turnover during the pandemic. When leaders aren't adapting to their needs, employees recognize that their leaders suck. My takeaway was that people need to figure out who they are as leaders in this new reality, to learn new ways of leading, and to take leadership fundamentals and apply them in ways so that employees will respond positively.

Hallucinating from the dehydration of not drinking water and spending days alone outside in the cold, I saw a robot executive with metal hands leading legions of droids who had taken over all the human jobs. *Oh no. Terminator was a prophecy. Rise of the Machines is real!* After snapping out of that technophobia psychosis panic attack, it occurred to me that the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) caused fears in others. As AI systems became increasingly sophisticated, they began to automate tasks once exclusive to humans, forcing leaders to confront the very nature of their work.

World Economic Forum Annual Report 2022–2023 calls for a “reskilling revolution,” emphasizing that “Technological shifts, geo-economic pressures, demographic changes and the green transition are creating structural churn across jobs and skills. Preparing learners and workers to navigate and thrive through this disruption is key to ensuring economic prosperity, social mobility, and societal stability.” According to the Forum’s Future of Jobs Report 2023, almost a quarter of jobs (23 percent) are expected to change in the next five years and over 40 percent of the core skills needed in the average job are also expected to change. This report is not the sci-fi fiction stuff of spaceships and aliens; this is real science that

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real people fear could take their jobs—their livelihoods—and food off their family table. AI stirs up fear because its impacts are unknown, and the unknown is scary. Leaders, you must learn how to leverage AI to make yourselves better leaders.

Around the tenth day of quarantine, sick and tired of blowing kisses to my wife and children from ten feet away, I started thinking about my TEDx Talk *Leaders Are Born To Be Made*. In that TEDx Talk, I made (and I continue to make) the bold assertion that every person is capable of being a leader. All the research answering the question, “Are leaders born or made?” points to biological and DNA evidence that yes, some people are natural born leaders and some people are not; but DNA is not destiny. I’m not suggesting that every person has the potential to become a CEO, just that everyone has a moment when it’s their time to lead, and we’d better prepare them to perform well when it is their turn.

The most profound shift in understanding leadership is emerging from looking inside the brain at the neurological level. Research in neuroscience has shown that the constant bombardment of digital stimuli is reshaping our brains, shortening our attention spans, and rewiring our neural pathways. This has profound implications for leadership, as it requires a fundamental rethinking of how we communicate, motivate, and inspire others.

Neuroleadership shows how by aligning your leadership with the way your brain naturally functions, you can create an environment that literally makes your team’s brains light up with enthusiasm and productivity. Positive leadership—think praise, rewards, or a boss who genuinely has your back—causes your brain to release a cocktail of “happiness hormones” (dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin) that trigger motivation and engagement. Conversely, dealing with a nightmare

boss or a toxic work environment triggers your brain's stress response and releases cortisol.

The pandemic forced us to confront a harsh truth: We had become weak leaders who relied on familiar tactics that made us feel strong but were ill-suited for the challenges of the twenty-first century. Clinging to outdated leadership models no longer serves us. The very tools that once propelled us to success are now holding us back. Our once-powerful leadership muscles are now weak. We need to develop new leadership muscles, to master the art of asynchronous communication, virtual trust-building, and remote performance management.

Tucked into a windblown tent, alone with my thoughts, I realized that for my entire life—from my academic pursuits to my entrepreneurial ventures—I had been preparing for this moment, to share with the world low-risk/high-reward ways to make managers and executives better leaders.

But how?

The world needs a new approach to leadership, one that acknowledges the profound changes we are experiencing at a biological, psychological, and societal level. We must embrace the discomfort of growth, the challenge of learning new ways of leading.

My life's mission is to encourage human beings to lead and offer them proper nutrition (food for thought in this book) and exercises (application strategies) to build Leader M.U.S.C.L.E. (which I will define in the next section), to become leaders worth following. I offer you a memoir and research-backed instructive account of how to become your future best self and learn why some people are "natural born leaders" while others take a lifetime to evolve into leaders.

This is a fundamental shift in how we cultivate the leaders of tomorrow. It's a reimagining of leader development that

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acknowledges the intricate dance among our biology, the ever-present force of technology, and the vast potential within each leader. This is a call to change the way people live and lead.

This book serves two primary purposes. First, it offers an instructive model for you to evolve into your future best-leader self. Second, it contextualizes present-day leadership challenges, including leading postpandemic, leveraging AI to become a better leader, and offering insight into neuroleadership. You'll get actionable strategies to become a leader that serves not just the bottom line by driving performance, but also helps you find your path to wholeness and self-leadership.

Each section contains chapters that tell a purposeful story, culminating in a lesson about life and how those experiences led to personal growth that catapulted my evolution into a leader. Every story is designed to elaborate a leadership lesson grounded in the science of leading. There are zero non-sensical, unsubstantiated information or recommendations.

Within these pages, you'll find a deep dive into your unique leadership profile. We'll analyze your experiences, challenge your assumptions, and uncover the potential that makes you a one-of-a-kind leader. Through real-world examples, you'll gain insights into your leadership style, strengths, and areas for growth. To start again as an effective and enduring leader in today's world, you must deeply understand your leadership self-concept, continuously adapt to your environment, and evolve both personally and professionally to meet the ever-changing challenges of the present day. You write your own leadership journey and work toward being the type of leader that fits your life.

INTRODUCTION

Building Leader M.U.S.C.L.E. Model

Leaders Are Born To Be Made, the book, presents my Leader M.U.S.C.L.E. model. This model includes the most critical elements for leadership excellence, organizational productivity, and individual well-being. Leader M.U.S.C.L.E. was developed through extensive proprietary research and real-world application and is a proven training program used by thousands of employees worldwide across diverse industries and company sizes. It empowers leaders to navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic conditions to create a healthy, productive leadership practice.

Here's a simple way to think about the model:

M = ME (Accepting That “All Leadership Starts With Me”)

The journey of leadership begins with a deep understanding of yourself. This foundational pillar of the M.U.S.C.L.E. model emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, personal growth, and the development of a strong leader identity.

- *Leaders Are Born To Be Made—Understanding The Biology, Neurology, DNA, And Motivation To Lead*: People's unique genetic makeup influences who is more and less likely to be perceived as a natural leader. But, leadership is a skill that can be taught and learned, meaning that every person is capable of leading. Chan and Drasgow defined motivation to lead (MTL) as an individual difference construct that influences a per-

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son's decisions to assume leadership roles, training, and responsibilities, as well as their intensity of effort and persistence in leading.

- *Leader Identity And Brand:* Leader identity refers to the meaning you attach to yourself in relation to others when you are in a leadership role, specific to each relationship and context. It is the part of your overall self-concept specific to leadership. Your leadership brand conveys your identity and distinctiveness as a leader. Personal branding is the process of establishing your image and value in the minds of others. A strong personal leadership brand amplifies what's powerful and effective about your leadership, enabling you to generate maximum value. A leader's purpose consists of the central motivating goals for being a leader. This purpose guides actions and inspires others.
- *Self-Leadership:* The ability to manage one's emotions, behaviors, and thoughts is crucial for effective leadership. Self-leadership enables you to influence yourself, make sound decisions, and navigate challenges with resilience.

U = UNDERSTANDING (Leader Intelligence)

Leader intelligence refers to the cognitive and emotional abilities that enable individuals to effectively guide, inspire, and influence others toward a common goal. It encompasses a wide range of skills, including critical thinking, creative thinking and strategic thinking, adaptability, interpersonal skills, learning agility, systems thinking, and ethical decision-making. Effective leaders possess a keen understanding of their environment,

their team, and the dynamics of the modern workplace. This section of the M.U.S.C.L.E. model explores the various facets of leader intelligence required to thrive in the postpandemic era:

- *Leadership Styles*: Leaders must be adaptable, drawing from a variety of styles (transformational, transactional, servant, charismatic) to suit different situations and individuals.
- *Artificial Intelligence*: Leaders should embrace AI as a tool to enhance decision-making, streamline processes, and personalize learning. AI can significantly improve employee performance and reduce training costs, but it cannot replace essential human leadership skills like strategic thinking, empathy, and ethical decision-making.

S = STRATEGY (Vision, Mission, Values, And ABCV: Always Be Creating Value)

Leadership is not just about managing the present; it's about shaping the future. The strategizing pillar of the M.U.S.C.L.E. model emphasizes the importance of creating a compelling vision, defining a clear mission, and upholding core values, all while continuously creating value (ABCV).

- *Vision*: A leader's vision is a vivid and inspiring picture of a desired future state. It provides direction, motivates action, and aligns the efforts of individuals and teams throughout the organization. A shared vision fosters a sense of purpose and collective commitment.
- *Mission*: A mission statement is a concise declaration of an organization's core purpose and reason for existence. It answers the fundamental question, "How and

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why do we do what we do?" A clear and meaningful mission statement guides decision-making, attracts talent, and builds a strong organizational culture.

- *Values*: Values are the deeply held beliefs and principles that guide an organization's behavior and decision-making. They serve as a moral compass, ensuring that actions are consistent with the organization's core identity and ethical standards.
- *ABCV (Always Be Creating Value)*: Leaders must instill a mindset of continuous value creation. This means constantly seeking ways to innovate, improve, and deliver greater value to customers, employees, and stakeholders. By embracing ABCV, leaders foster a culture of continuous improvement, where experimentation and risk-taking are encouraged.

C = CONFLICT (How To Use Conflict To Generate Win-Win Solutions)

Conflict is an inherent part of human interaction, and it's no different in the workplace. However, conflict doesn't have to be destructive. The conflict pillar of the M.U.S.C.L.E. model emphasizes that conflict, when managed effectively, can be a catalyst for growth, innovation, and stronger relationships.

- *Win-Win Solutions*: Leaders skilled in conflict resolution aim to find solutions that benefit all parties involved. This involves active listening, empathy, open communication, and a willingness to compromise. By seeking win-win outcomes, leaders build trust, foster collaboration, and resolve conflicts in a way that strengthens relationships.

- *Innovation*: Conflict can spark creativity and lead to breakthrough ideas. By encouraging diverse perspectives and constructive debate, leaders can harness the energy of conflict to drive innovation and solve complex problems.
- *Building Relationships*: Conflict can be an opportunity to deepen understanding and empathy among individuals and teams. When handled with respect and a focus on mutual understanding, conflict can lead to stronger bonds and a more cohesive workplace culture.
- *Difficult Conversations*: Leaders must be willing to have challenging conversations when necessary. By addressing issues directly and honestly, they prevent conflicts from escalating and create a culture of trust and accountability.

L = LEARNING (How To Be A Mentor And Learn Every Day)

Learning is a lifelong endeavor, and leaders must be committed to continuous growth and development. The learning pillar of the M.U.S.C.L.E. model emphasizes the importance of mentorship, adapting to new technologies, and embracing a learner's mindset.

- *Mentoring*: Mentoring is a powerful tool for leadership development. Leaders have a responsibility to share their wisdom, knowledge, and experience with others, guiding and supporting aspiring leaders on their own journeys. Mentoring relationships benefit both the mentor and mentee, fostering growth, learning, and mutual respect.

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- *Making Life-Changing Decisions:* Understanding where you are and where you want to be in life demands that you evaluate who you are and who you want to become. To achieve your future best self, you'll need to make sacrifices, retool yourself through immersive learning experiences, and rebuild your identity. Becoming a new you requires that you learn new concepts and ideas, put your new knowledge into practice, and become an everyday learner.

E = ENTREPRENEUR (How To Think And Act Like An Entrepreneur)

An entrepreneurial mindset is not limited to those who start their own businesses. The entrepreneur pillar of the M.U.S.C.L.E. model encourages all leaders to adopt an entrepreneurial spirit, characterized by innovation, resourcefulness, and a bias for action.

- *Ownership Mentality:* Leaders with an ownership mentality treat their teams or business units as if they were their own companies. They are deeply committed to the success of their team and take full responsibility for the outcomes. This mindset fosters accountability, initiative, and a sense of pride in one's work.
- *Resourcefulness:* Entrepreneurs are known for their ability to do more with less. They are creative problem-solvers who can find innovative ways to overcome challenges and achieve their goals. Resourceful leaders inspire their teams to be adaptable, resilient, and resourceful in the face of adversity.

INTRODUCTION

If your organization is to attract and retain top talent, your leaders must be at the forefront of the battle. It's your responsibility to do two things well to attract top talent:

- Deliver training and development that helps employees learn to lead
- Motivate your employees to lead better while doing work that keeps them engaged and challenged

To find out how to build Leader M.U.S.C.L.E., keep reading.

Dr. Bryan Deptula

Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

M = ME

**ALL LEADERSHIP
STARTS WITH ME**

1

BELIEVE: LEADERS ARE BORN TO BE MADE

Without fail, no matter the audience, conference, or company, or whether working with executives or frontline employees, there was always *the one question people asked: Are leaders born or made?* The question at the genesis of why I decided to quit a six-figure salary and pursue the MBA and PhD was this: If leaders are born, and they can't be made, then what is the point of investing in leadership development and training? I had spent the better part of a decade discovering through practice and research that if you invest in people—your employees—they will work harder, smarter, more efficiently, be less likely to quit and more likely to stay, and form bonds with the company that make them care more about it and the people who lead it. For the record, return on investment (ROI) on leader development initiatives often exceeds 200 percent.¹

Scholars have long been chipping away at the answer to the nature versus nurture question of whether leaders are born or made. The problem is that the pedantic language and complex methodologies of academic leadership research make it impossible to understand for anyone without a doctorate. As an academic, speaker, and entrepreneur, I've dedicated my career to bridging this gap between research and practice, translating rigorous research findings into action-

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able strategies for real-world leaders and organizations. In very real terms, I am my own audience, and I am you: a business owner who struggles with leadership every day.

GENETIC FOUNDATIONS OF LEADERSHIP

People romanticize about *great man* theories of leadership, attributing supernatural powers to legendary historical figures² such as Alexander the Great and Roman Caesars. Leadership in extreme contexts such as war recalls heroes George Washington of the American Revolution, and Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill during World War II. Think of civil rights champions Mahatma Gandhi of India, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We lavish praise on J. P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie, robber barons who built financial empires with unethical business practices, on the backs of poor laborers during the industrial and financial boom of the nineteenth century. Modern corporate empire builders are exemplified in Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Carlos Slim of Mexico. In popular culture, fame, fortune, glory, and power are coveted leadership outcomes. To conceptualize leaders and leadership this way is not wrong, but it is an *incomplete and contextually limited understanding* that precedes the false notion that leaders are born with special DNA and that leadership is inaccessible to common folk.

Misunderstanding who leaders are, what leadership is, where and when leadership happens, why everyone is capable of leading, and how leaders develop throughout life, blinds us from recognizing ourselves—and familiar faces of people we know—as leaders, and from recognizing leadership when

BELIEVE: LEADERS ARE BORN TO BE MADE

it is occurring right in front of our eyes. By changing our pre-conceived and unanalyzed implicit leadership theories (there are eight distinct factors of ILTs: sensitivity, dedication, tyranny, charisma, attractiveness, masculinity, intelligence, and strength)^{3, 4} we quickly recognize the humble, inglorious, selfless—with no financial reward—work of feeding impoverished people and those afflicted with leprosy, as Mother Teresa did. Leadership occurs every day, in every home and family, in our communities—educational, governmental, and religious institutions—at every level of every organization, in big and small ways.

Leaders are the parents who prepare kids for a camping trip and employees who take charge of projects or a task force. Leadership happens when teachers lead classrooms, friends organize vacations, and communities rally around a cause worth supporting. Framing leaders, leadership, and leader development in this way makes becoming a leader possible for everyone, and leadership an accessible opportunity.

The quest to understand leadership has led researchers to explore the very building blocks of human biology. At the forefront of this exploration is a series of longitudinal studies on fraternal and identical twins that sought to figure out why one twin would be in a leadership position whereas the other twin would not be.⁵ These genius researchers identified a specific genetic marker associated with leadership: the rs4950 single nucleotide polymorphism on the CHRN3 gene. This gene is involved in the production of nicotinic acetylcholine receptors, which play a crucial role in neurotransmission.

The hands-on implications of this discovery are profound: individuals with the rs4950 allele are 50 percent more likely to occupy leadership positions, suggesting a biological predisposition toward leadership behaviors. A key takeaway,

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though, is that only 24 percent of people expressed this rs4950 allele; meaning that select few people can attribute their leadership role to their leader genes.

A preponderance of research validates the notion that leadership genes can be inherited from ancestral predecessors, and that age and gender influence leader emergence, with women being more likely to lead during their child-rearing years.⁶

The genetic basis of leadership is responsible for the five personality traits closely associated with effective leadership: extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and agreeableness. Extraversion is linked to variations in DRD4 and DRD2 genes related to dopamine transmission. Extraverts tend to be more comfortable in social situations, making them more likely to be perceived as leaders. They often exhibit higher levels of assertiveness and enthusiasm, traits that are frequently associated with effective leadership.

Openness to experience, another crucial leadership trait, is linked to variations in the KATNAL2 gene. Individuals high in openness are more receptive to new ideas and experiences. In the context of leadership, this translates to innovation and adaptability—qualities that are increasingly vital in our rapidly changing world.

Conscientiousness, associated with variations in the KATNAL2 and NMUR2 genes, manifests in individuals who tend to be organized, reliable, and goal oriented. These traits are crucial for effective leadership and task completion, often determining the difference between a vision and its successful implementation.

Emotional stability is linked to variations in the SLC6A4 gene involved in serotonin transport. Generally, higher levels of emotional stability are associated with better leadership, as these individuals tend to handle stress more effectively—a critical skill in high-pressure leadership positions. Lower levels

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of emotional stability lead to dysfunctional relationships, roller-coaster mood swings, and irrational outbursts that we've all been subjugated to in a toxic leader-follower relationship.

Lastly, agreeableness, associated with variations in the CLOCK gene, presents an interesting case in leadership. While high agreeableness can foster team cohesion, moderate levels are often more beneficial for leadership, allowing for the necessary assertiveness required in decision-making and direction setting.

NEUROLOGY: A LOOK INSIDE THE LEADER'S BRAIN

The brain's neurotransmitters play a pivotal role in shaping leadership behaviors and capabilities. It's important to note that leadership involves complex cognitive and behavioral processes that can't be reduced to single neurotransmitters. These chemicals interact in intricate ways to influence behavior, mood, and cognitive function. Your genetic blueprint and neural architecture form the foundation of your leadership potential. This biological scaffolding influences everything from your decision-making style to your ability to inspire others.

Below is a nonexhaustive list of neurotransmitters that relate to leadership:

- *Dopamine*: A key neurotransmitter in the brain's reward system, influences motivation, decision-making, and risk-taking behaviors, dopamine helps leaders stay focused on goals and objectives and feel rewarded when achieving them. Leaders with optimal dopamine levels may be more decisive and action oriented, traits that can be crucial in fast-paced, high-stakes environments.

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- *Serotonin*: This neurotransmitter regulates mood, social behavior, and cognitive functions, and contributes to emotional stability and interpersonal effectiveness. Balanced serotonin levels can help leaders maintain composure under pressure and navigate complex social dynamics with greater ease. Serotonin helps leaders maintain emotional stability and positive interactions with team members.
- *Endorphins*: These are the body's natural painkillers and producers of euphoria. Endorphins often can be released in response to certain rewards or achievements.
- *GABA (Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid)*: GABA aids in stress management and emotional control. It helps leaders stay calm under pressure and make rational decisions.
- *Glutamate*: Glutamate is essential for learning and memory. It enables leaders to acquire new skills, adapt to changes, and remember important information.
- *Acetylcholine*: Enhancing attention and memory, acetylcholine helps leaders stay focused during meetings and retain important details.
- *Adrenaline*: This provides the "edge" needed in high-pressure situations. It can help leaders perform well in crises or during important presentations.
- *Norepinephrine*: A neurotransmitter that increases alertness and focus, it helps leaders stay attentive during long work hours or complex problem-solving.

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- *Testosterone*: Testosterone influences assertiveness and competitiveness. Moderate testosterone levels are associated with effective leadership, influencing confidence and decision-making. Conversely, excessively high levels can lead to overly aggressive authoritarian behaviors, fear-based influence tactics, and a culture of intimidation.
- *Oxytocin*: The “bonding hormone” or “trust hormone,” oxytocin helps leaders build rapport, which promotes trust and social bonding. Leaders with higher oxytocin levels may be more effective in building team cohesion and fostering loyalty among their followers, creating a more unified and motivated workforce.
- *Vasopressin*: Vasopressin influences social behavior and bonding. It may play a role in a leader’s ability to form strong team relationships and loyalty.
- *Cortisol*: The “stress hormone,” cortisol has both positive and negative effects on leadership. In response to stress, an acute cortisol release can enhance focus and decision-making, but chronic elevated levels can impair leadership performance. When cortisol floods the body, your fight-or-flight response kicks in. Under constant stress, your brain sends signals for you to take flight and get to safety; that is to quit your job. We all know that the number one reason for turnover is that people quit their bosses. Effective leaders often show better stress management—maintaining optimal cortisol levels for peak performance without succumbing to the detrimental effects of chronic stress—and make an effort to induce appropriate amounts of stress to induce positive productivity from their workforce.

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If you don't have the traits or gene expressions listed above, does that mean you're not going to be a leader? Of course not. And if you do have these traits and these genes, does that mean you're absolutely going to be a leader? Of course not.

Research accounts for the longitudinal “nurture” of leader development. Only by integrating findings from both nature and nurture streams of research, when observed in tandem, does a robust picture emerge of the factors that influence who will lead and how they will come to lead.

Approximately 75 to 80 percent of predictive variance of whether a person will occupy a leadership role resides in a combination of nurture and unobservable factors that influence human thinking and behaving.

Longitudinal studies of leadership development effectively delve into and explain how leaders are made through a lifespan narrative of leader identity development, exposure to leadership roles, feedback from subordinates, peers, supervisors, and biographical inputs.⁷ Turns out, leaders are products of their experiences and exposure to leadership development.⁸ More exposure to leadership experiences and roles leads to formation of a leader identity. Leaders claim leadership, which followers either grant or reject.⁹ Life narrative research speaks mostly to how people evolve into leaders and form a leader identity throughout life, and it speaks a little of whether and how someone becomes an effective leader, and speaks less about what approach to leadership a person will take.

Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of the neuroscience of leadership is the brain's remarkable plasticity. Neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to form new neural connections—is crucial

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in leadership development. While genetic predispositions provide a starting point, experiences and learning can significantly alter brain structure and function.

This means that through deliberate practice and exposure to leadership experiences, individuals can enhance their leadership capabilities, regardless of their genetic starting point. It's a powerful reminder that leadership is not solely determined by our genes but is a skill that can be developed and refined over time.

MOTIVATION TO LEAD

You can learn all day long about the traits and genes of leaders, but even in knowing what to do, how to do it, and when to do it, if you're not motivated to lead—not given the opportunity to “try” being a leader—you won't lead. Motivation to lead refers to the set of forces within a person's heart and mind, and those outside that person within the environment they're presently in; this affects the desire, intensity of effort, and a leader's (or aspiring leader's) decision to assert themselves as a leader, persist as a leader, and seek opportunities and education to develop themselves into a leader.

Research suggests people are motivated to lead by the following elements.¹⁰ The greater the intensity of each element, the higher the person's motivation to lead (MTL):

- *Affective-Identity MTL*: This is seeing yourself as a leader. The identity of a leader isn't a separate concept because being a leader is simply “who they are.” They make no distinction between the role of leader and any other part of their core identity and self-concept.

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- *Emotive MTL*: Some people simply like to lead because they feel joy when leading. The more they lead, the happier they are.
- *Social-Normative MTL*: Some lead out of a sense of duty and social responsibility to help others and respect hierarchies. People with a high sense of duty and responsibility tend to have more leadership experiences.
- *Noncalculative MTL*: The willingness to lead without expecting external rewards or recognition.

A person's motivation to lead is influenced—and can be increased or decreased—by the specific work or life area in which they participate. This means people are more or less motivated to lead depending on what they're doing, who they're doing it with, and whether they want to lead in that specific context. Past leadership experiences, personality, values, and self-efficacy all influence motivation to lead. The implication of this research is the proof that factors outside of the person themselves influence a person's motivation to lead. Researchers assume neither that people are motivated to lead by birth nor that a person's unconscious needs for achievement, power, or affiliation energize their motivation to lead.

The key takeaway is that—outside of all biological factors—seeing yourself as a leader, the joy of leading, and the opportunity to fulfill one's duty, as well as context and environment, are factors organizations and people can promote through training and development and organizational programs to motivate people to become leaders.

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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT LEADER GENES AND NEUROLEADERSHIP

Understanding the genetic and neurological underpinnings of leadership has significant practical implications. I want you to stop thinking about whether leaders are born or made. Science has proven that leaders are born to be made; and that's the point of investing your time, effort, and money in leadership development and training. Yes, it is worth investing in leadership development because you can influence the emergence and performance of leaders within organizations and people in societies. Yes, for companies seeking to develop employees and for individuals seeking personal development, investing in a leadership development program has a high positive return on investment (ROI).

Think of your leader genes and neurology as foundational muscle. Some folks might have bigger muscles to start with, but anyone can build strength with the right training regimen. Ongoing leadership experiences capitalize on the brain's ability to change and adapt, allowing for continual growth and improvement in leadership capabilities.

Emerging research in neurological informed leadership reveals that our genetic makeup and brain chemistry significantly influence our leadership capabilities. By examining your leader genes and neurology, you can gain a profound understanding of your innate strengths, potential challenges, and the most effective strategies for personal and professional growth. Knowing what leader genes you do and don't have, and how your neurological programming affects your thoughts and behavior, provides a scientific basis for

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understanding why you might excel in certain areas of leadership naturally, and why other areas may require more effort.

This information empowers you to create a strategic personal leadership development program based on your individual genetics, neurobiology, and environmental factors that can be refined throughout your lifetime.

All the research I've studied points to this one overwhelming conclusion: At some point in their life, every person has led or will lead. If everyone will lead, that means everyone can lead. Leadership isn't some exclusive club for the genetically blessed or the corporately anointed. Leading is an innate human behavior, as natural as breathing.

Certainly, every person has had a moment in their life when they had the opportunity to be a leader. Whether they will lead, or are motivated to lead, rests on genetic, biological, and neurological factors within themselves and external factors within their environment.