

The Myth of the Alpha Dog

Turns out what holds in the animal kingdom may not work for humans. The leaders of our packs are made, not born.

BY MICHAEL Q. BULLERDICK



THAT DIFFICULT, DEMANDING boss who still haunts your nightmares? Blame him on the wolves. Turns out man's earliest concept of leadership originated with our wild canine friends. Way back when, 135,000 years ago or so, humans and canines developed along parallel and codependent tracks. While we were busy transforming wolves into domesticated dogs, they were busy teaching us a thing or two about structuring an efficient society. Observing wolves, early humans quickly figured out they stood a better chance of survival if they formed close-knit, hierarchical packs that were managed by the strongest, smartest, and most aggressive among them—the alpha dogs.

After so many intervening generations of survival-based psychosocial reinforcement, a command-and-control model of leadership remains an entrenched part of humankind's collective unconscious. Which is why, for the better part of the 20th century, the study of leadership dynamics was principally concerned with identifying common alpha traits. Good leaders, psychiatrists asserted again and again, were born of the best stock, with certain heritable characteristics that pegged them as ideally suited to the task of directing others: extrover-

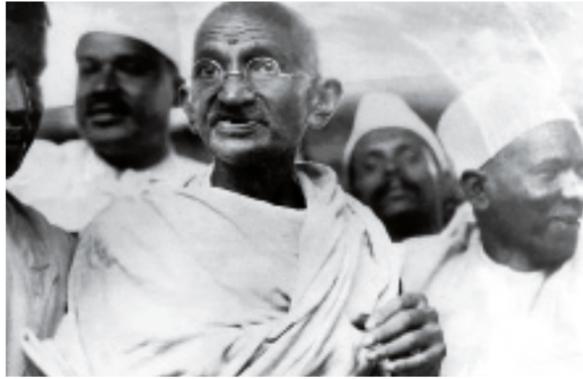
sion, decisiveness, charisma, and, yes, even a certain level of aggression, to name a few. The prevailing wisdom was that you either had what it took to succeed or you didn't—end of story. For nearly 50 years the U.S. military and many Fortune 500 companies recruited and groomed potential officers and executives based on entrance and performance evaluations designed to reveal desirable traits and weed out disqualifying flaws.

But though it was perfectly plausible as a research starting point, trait theory fell flat over time. As researchers learned more about brain function and the more complex origins of personality, they saw that their understanding of leadership was insufficient. For one thing, trait theory failed to locate the origins of leadership traits in the brain. It also failed to explain whether these traits could be acquired or enhanced. Over the last 20 years or so, however, newer technologies, including brain imaging, have allowed the science to go beyond trait theory, revealing some fundamental principles about brain function that may one day send the concept of alpha dogs to the pound.

Trait theory took its first debilitating hit when research revealed that the brain does not settle into a relatively fixed state as we grow into adulthood. Rather, it remains malleable throughout our lifetime. Neuroplasticity, as the scientists call it, covers how our thoughts and actions and various external stimuli alter both our

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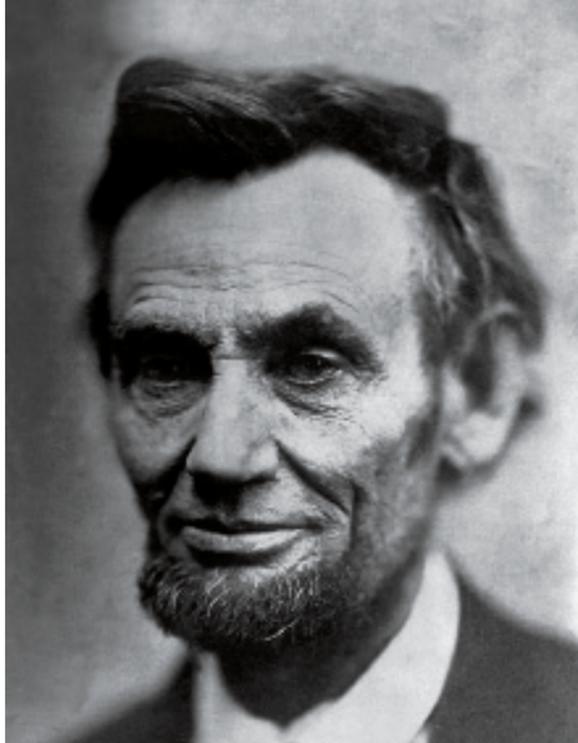
MOHANDAS GANDHI Holding no official title and commanding no armies, Gandhi led India toward independence. “A man is but the product of his thoughts,” he said. “What he thinks he becomes.”



ELEANOR ROOSEVELT Not viewing herself as a leader, Roosevelt attributed success to empathy and learning from failure. “The influence you exert,” she said, “is through your own life and what you’ve become yourself.”

brain’s structure and its function. It works like this: When we commit to learning something new—say, playing a musical instrument—neurons in affected regions of the brain seek out other neurons, interconnecting to create waypoints of stored memory. When a critical mass of neurons unite, a new network is formed. The network will continue to become stronger and faster the more frequently it is accessed. This explains not only how we learn to play an instrument at all but also why we are able to master it over time.

Neuroplasticity demonstrated that the age-old question about whether leaders are born or made was largely irrelevant. If the brain can bypass unwanted, insufficient, or damaged neural pathways to build new and improved ones, then the possibilities for self-improvement could be limitless. The follow-up punch to alpha-trait theory was the realization that positive learning takes



ABRAHAM LINCOLN “You cannot build character and courage by taking away a man’s initiative and independence,” said Lincoln, whose ability to motivate and empower people grew over the course of his career.



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. “The supreme task [of a leader] is to organize and unite people,” said King, who believed that wisdom came from even the most humble people and no one was to be underestimated.

place only when learners feel safe, mentally in tune with their leaders, and truly engaged in a task. Once again it was brain-scanning technology, like functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), that was responsible for updating the model. Measuring brain activity, researchers discovered that critical thinking and learning are inhibited by fear. Fear, they found, channels resources away from higher brain regions and toward a lower region known as the amygdala, a part of the limbic system, which processes emotions. The amygdala goes into overdrive in response to threats, activating our primal “fight or flight” reflex that floods the body with adrenaline and cortisol. As a result, brain functions that facilitate learning—such as cognition, rational thought, and logic—take a back seat and are effectively suspended. The same holds true when we experience milder forms of fear like anxiety and stress. It’s why office tyrants can

succeed in motivating subordinates to perform rote tasks, such as reporting for work on time, but routinely fail to inspire creativity.

Experts will say that leadership, boiled down to its essence, is really the ability to communicate goals and influence people to act in ways that make achieving those goals possible—to motivate in order to effect change. That sounds straightforward enough, but it’s easier said than done. “Try to change another person’s behavior, even with the best of intentions, and he or she will experience discomfort. It takes a strong will to push past such [fear-based] mental activity,” note researchers David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz, titans in the study of leadership dynamics. “The brain sends out powerful messages that something is wrong. Change itself thus amplifies stress and discomfort.”

So if fear and intimidation won’t cut it—certainly not in today’s information-age industries—what will? It turns out the best leadership strategy is a collaborative approach. Psychologist Daniel Goleman, a pioneer in fMRI research, talks about “resonant leaders,” those men and women who demonstrate an emotional responsiveness toward their subordinates as they engage them in the creative and decision-making processes. When they impart information—by speech, body language, or energy output—resonant leaders continually monitor their own actions even as they interpret the emotions of their followers. Spotting subtle signs of rejection or disengagement, they are able to make on-the-fly adjustments to keep the creative processes firing. The term for it, emotional intelligence, was popularized by Goleman, but the concept goes all the way back to the work of Charles Darwin.

Abraham Lincoln, who had the toughest leadership task of any American president, demonstrated “an extraordinary amount of emotional intelligence,” wrote historian Doris Kearns Goodwin in a 2009 essay about the 16th president’s management style in the *Harvard Business Review*. Although he was largely self-educated and certainly received no formal leadership training, Lincoln transformed himself from an ineffectual congressman from Illinois to the shrewd strategist who navigated the country through its worst political crisis. Credit his success, Goodwin says, to that emotional resonance. As her book *Team of Rivals* chronicles, Lincoln had the confidence to appoint former enemies to cabinet posts and encouraged lively debate with dissenters who never had to fear rebuke or retaliation. More important still, he listened well and empathetically as he opened the White House to the public and waded among the crowds to take what he called “public-opinion baths.” Lincoln claimed he rarely gave direct orders; instead, he preferred “offering advice as suggestions” and “telling little stories,”

often incorporating humor, to turn others toward his way of thinking. “If you would win a man to your cause,” he said, “first convince him that you are his friend.”

If neurologists had been around in mid-19th-century America, they would have written papers that linked the success of Honest Abe’s invitational approach to a brain phenomenon known as neural mirroring. The concept explains what occurs when neurons within major brain centers of different people fall into alignment. Goleman’s 2008 study, also published in the *Harvard Business Review*, concluded that resonant leaders “help activate openness to new ideas [neuroplasticity] and a more social orientation to others [neural mirroring].” Earlier groundbreaking work published in *Current Biology* revealed that during this optimal state, participants mentally mimic their leader’s actions, emotions, and intentions. It’s what we think of more commonly as trust, and it occurs when the brain boosts production of oxytocin, a hormone that facilitates bonding—between mother and child, between mutually attracted individuals, between long-term friends and tribesmen.

Clearly, neural mirroring can increase the odds that shared goals will be met. More significantly, though, initiating the process cultivates the growth of receptive pathways in the brains of subordinates. That’s neuroplasticity—learning—at work. One especially intriguing aspect of neural mirroring is that it can even occur remotely, for instance through videoconferencing. That’s no small thing in today’s global workplace. What matters, say researchers Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind, is “mental or emotional proximity.” Adept leaders, they note, “step down from their corporate perches and then step up to the challenge of communicating personally and transparently.”

At his standing-room-only seminars, Harvard psychologist Srinivasan S. Pillay teaches would-be leaders just how to step up. Like the rare magician who reveals the mechanics behind his deception, Pillay lectures his audience on the principles of neural mirroring, then demonstrates its immediate effectiveness. In short, he uses neural mirroring to teach it. “The brains of these listeners are suddenly faced with an understanding of themselves,” writes Pillay in his book *Your Brain and Business: The Neuroscience of Great Leaders*. “And I can sense that there is a readiness to change.” As minds are transformed, a new breed of boss is made.

Pillay has built a successful business around preaching that if we can’t all magically morph into latter-day Lincolns, we can learn to be more collaborative, emotionally resonant managers. And that means while some top dogs are undoubtedly born, others can surely be molded. Sometimes all it takes to lead is the willingness and fearlessness to follow a new approach.

“Be the
change you
wish to see in
the world.”
—Mohandas Gandhi

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