

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL REMARKS ON EDUCATING GENUINE LEADERS

“We are Dwarfs Standing on the Shoulders of Giants.”
- Bernard of Chartres

The title of this article may be puzzling. For as anyone who has ever done any research on leadership knows well, inventing definitions seems to be an accepted practice among scholars who discuss this subject.¹ This number of approaches should make one embarrassed. How then can one make any remarks on educating leaders while having no commonly accepted account of leadership?

Let us propose, however, an intellectual experiment which will start with a well-known description of leadership given by former U.S. president Harry S. Truman. His remark seems to be a serious contribution, for – as we learn from the *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* – it echoes most meaningful attempts at defining leadership. Truman said that “leadership is the ability to get others to willingly move in a new direction in which they are not naturally inclined to move on their own.”² Now, let us pretend for a while that we are not sure about accepting this explanation, and that we need to have it made more clear and distinct in its details.

Abilities of a Leader

Leaders are commonly expected to possess some special qualities or characteristics.³ There is, however, a long-standing controversy about whether leaders are born with talents and traits that allow, or even cause, them to be

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¹ Cf.: Ralph E. Stogdill, *Handbook of leadership: A survey of the literature* (New York: Free Press, 1974), p. 7: “There are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept.” Richard A. Barker claims, however, that “non defining” is the common practice of scholars in their reference to leadership (see: “How Can We Train Leaders if We Do Not Know What Leadership Is?,” *Human Relations* 50 (No. 4, 1997): pp. 343-345).

² Steven B. Sample, “Leadership,” in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 3, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz (Detroit etc.: Thomson Gale, 2005), p. 1254.

³ Arthur G. Jago, “Leadership: Perspectives in theory and research,” *Management Science* (1982, No. 28): p. 315.

successful leaders, or whether effective leadership behaviors can be learned through education and experience.⁴

What do we think about leadership abilities? Do we stand for leadership as an acquired skill or rather as an innate quality? Do we opt for culture, or rather for nature, as the necessary and sufficient factor in the process of educating genuine leaders?⁵ The problem seems to take after the controversy on education between the ancient Sophists and philosophers, and it is here that we can likely find some useful indications for the present day.

Protagoras, an outstanding Sophist of Athens, used to maintain that there is nothing constant or unchangeable in human life, for the thing called *human nature* cannot be any point of reference, as it is merely an invented projection. Every man then, while being a measure of himself and all things around, is able to create his own image and strive for the acknowledgement of his opinions in the public domain. If Protagoras were ever able to speak to us on leadership education, he would for certain say that the principal assignment of all its pursuits is to motivate students. For good leaders are made, not born, and everybody who has the desire and will power can become an effective leader.⁶

Plato, the founder of the ancient Athenian Academy, opposed Protagoras, saying that motivation is not as crucial in leadership training as are inborn predispositions – namely, innate knowledge, which does matter a lot in education, because it is what enables any teaching to be valuable. According to him, genuine leaders are not so by nature. If they had been made without being nurtured by others – as he writes in his dialogue *Meno* –

“there would assuredly have been discerners of characters among us who would have known our future great men; and on their showing we should have adopted them, and when we had got them, we should have kept them in the citadel out of the way of harm, and set a stamp upon them far rather than upon a piece of gold, in order that no one might tamper with them; and when they grew up they would have been useful to the state.”⁷

In consequence, Plato maintains that leadership is acquired by instruction, as leaders’ abilities are either wholly or partly in the form of knowledge, which enables them to perform any profession well.

For Plato, however, true knowledge is inborn. He makes it clear especially in the above-mentioned dialogue *Meno*, where Socrates draws out of Meno’s untaught slave-boy the basic truths of Euclidian geometry, which he is

⁴ Linda D. Henman, *Leadership: Theories and Controversies*, <http://www.henmanperformancegroup.com/articles/Leadership-Theories.pdf>, accessed Oct 13, 2011.

⁵ Cf.: Melissa A. Chase, “Should Coaches Believe in Innate Ability? The Importance of Leadership Mindset,” *Quest* (2010, No. 62): pp. 296-297.

⁶ Evelyn Banks, “Developing leadership excellence,” *Recruiter* (September/October, 2006): p. 4.

⁷ Plato, *Meno*, transl. Benjamin Jowett, XXV, 89b.

shown to possess innately.⁸ Plato argues that, since intellectual abilities are thus already in the mind of the knower, they must not be imparted, but rather they must be drawn out, prompted, recalled, or elicited by skillful teachers. Now, if Plato, the most eminent student of Socrates, could speak to us on education, he would surely claim that the success in educating genuine leaders in fact consists in the accurate recognition of human inborn resources and their effective reactivation. This intuition implicitly leads to a conclusion that education always undergoes some kind of crisis if based on mere opinion. For opinion differs from knowledge in much the same way that people who merely think the truth differ from people who know the truth; even if those who rely on opinion sometimes say things truly, they do not know what they say.⁹ Thus, in opposition to Protagoras, Plato does not treat any future leader simply as an amorphous clay to be shaped at will, but he fully respects his or her nature, which consists of definite inclinations, and needs to be developed under the auspices of truth.

The entire classical tradition of philosophy notes that all human abilities come from nature in order to be perfected by habit and knowledge. A man's nature is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for possessing abilities. Education is needed to perfect the mere potentials provided by nature.¹⁰ More than two thousand years ago, Cicero rightly observed in his *Tusculan Disputations*, that

“as a field, although it may be naturally fruitful, cannot produce a crop without dressing, so neither can the mind without education; such is the weakness of either without the other. Whereas philosophy is the culture of the mind: this it is which plucks up vices by the roots; prepares the mind for the receiving of seeds; commits them to it, or, as I may say, sows them, in the hope that, when come to maturity, they may produce a plentiful harvest.”¹¹

By his nature, then, man is to learn and his potential is to be developed. This can be a life-long process, in which any opportunity to learn is seized upon, whether it be training programs, social encounters, personal or professional experiences, good readings, hobbies, etc. In fact, for a person who is eager to learn and develop her potential, the possibilities for learning are endless and advantageous.¹²

⁸ Id., XVI, 82c – XXI, 86c.

⁹ Id., XLI, 99c.

¹⁰ Cf.: Elizabeth C. Shaw, “Philosophers for the City: Aristotle and the Telos of Education,” *Modern Age* (2005, No. 1): p. 31.

¹¹ *Cicero's Tusculan Disputations*, transl. C. D. Yonge (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), p. 69. „Ut ager, quamvis fertilis, sine cultura fructuosus esse non potest; sic sine doctrina animus [...] Cultura autem animi philosophia est: haec extrahit vitia radicitus et praeparat animos ad satus accipiendos, eaque mandat his, et, ut ita dicam, serit, quae adulta fructus uberrimos ferant” (*M. Tulli Ciceronis Disputationes Tusculanae*, ed. B. Klotz (Lipsk 1835), p. 53).

¹² Laurent Lapiere, “To Teach Leadership or to Really Train Leaders?,” p. 1, <http://laurentlapier>

The classical philosopher would certainly add that if man is distinguished by his nature, then the goal of education is to be identical with the natural goal of man. All forms of education, leadership education included, must be explicitly or implicitly directed towards the complete self-realization of man. Aristotle, the prominent student of Plato, reminds us that the supreme good, to which all people aspire, is neither to be a noble savage, nor man in his natural state, but rather the educated man. All abilities then, as the work of education, are as much worthy as they converge with the optimum, to which man is called by his nature. Thus, the relation between human nature and leadership abilities shows us its inalienable ethical character. Only those abilities deserve a positive assessment which conform to the truth about the nature of man.¹³

Since abilities are implanted by nature, developed by culture, and assessed in the light of their contribution to human advancement, then we can ask a further question whether there is any leadership ability that is the most important. It seems that the reply is simple. For, given the wide range of human organizations and levels of power within organizations, leaders in different contexts need different clusters of abilities. Moreover, all leaders face limits on the scope of their power. Such limits may include not only superior authority in a hierarchy, but also the presence of powerful competitors, the interests of key constituencies whose support is important if the leader is to retain power, the necessity for the leader to appeal to an electorate on a regular basis, or a board of trustees or directors that appoints, and may remove, the leader.¹⁴ Different types of expectations and limits entail a seemingly justified doubt that there may exist any one leadership ability which should be recognized as primary.

re.com/presentation - accessed Aug 13, 2011. See also id., p. 2: "Leadership is a practice that is learned for the most part from experience, first that of others, and then one's own. This learning occurs through action that is enriched by simultaneous or *a posteriori* reflection and that, by dint of repetition, can then be more solidly integrated into the construction of an action that is all one's own. Leaders are often very interested in the practice of other leaders, finding therein not only a source of inspiration but also of self-discovery. It's no coincidence that they have a propensity to read biographies and autobiographies". And: Jay Conger, "Can We Really Train Leadership?" *Strategy & Business* 2 (Winter, 1996): pp. 52 and 61: "Plato argued that he needed 50 years to train a good leader... Plato advocated a leadership program that took a lifetime, but we don't have that luxury. And while Plato's program sits at one extreme of the time investment spectrum, most leadership training programs sit at the other. The *one shot* three-day program cannot miraculously transform your managers into leaders. At best, it will create an awareness of what leadership is, but not much more. We must realize that leadership training needs to involve numerous initiatives that occur over the long term."

¹³ Cf.: Charles Hummel, "Aristotle," *PROSPECTS* 23 (1993, No. 1/2): p. 39.

¹⁴ See: Nannerl O. Keohane, "On Leadership," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005, No. 4): p. 708. Cf. also Linda D. Henman, *Leadership: Theories and Controversies*, op. cit.: "There is not even consensus about *universal traits* that cause leaders to be effective. Often leaders are intelligent, knowledgeable, attractive, sociable, and persistent; but there are exceptions. There are effective leaders who do not embody one or more of these traits, so defining absolutes is impossible."

Such a conclusion may also be confirmed by the failure of a scientific approach (called the “great person” approach), which posited that individuals who are successful leaders should have similar personality characteristics, regardless of the situation in which they are asked to lead. After hundreds of studies, the “great person” approach was abandoned because a common set of leadership characteristics was not found. Researchers inferred that there are no specific characteristics that lead to effective leadership.¹⁵

Although the answer is simple indeed, it does not deny, however, the existence of a principal leadership ability. If leaders are to compete with other leaders, and be followed by other people, then they must have something in common not only with their rivals, but with their actual and potential followers as well. People may differ from one another in respect of countless characteristics, but they share with each other one specifically human feature: making decisions. If leadership is based on abilities, then the ability of making proper decisions seems to be indispensable for being a leader. For leaders make decisions, and they have to make them in excellent ways (the English word *excellence* is a good translation of the Greek *aretē*). Usually, they are expected to decide on collecting resources, creating incentives, articulating goals, identifying strategies for solving problems, persuading others to follow a desirable course, etc. The issues that leaders must address have broad implications, and a large number of human beings are affected. Therefore, no one else has the same obligation and responsibility.¹⁶

The ability of making decisions, in turn, is much indebted to judgment. Judgment is evidently present in these parts of a leader’s business, such as identifying issues and priorities, knowing how to allocate time and energy, seeing how to properly use skills of other people, etc. If we asked Aristotle to give us a philosophical account of judgment, he would surely say that it relates to action, and so is concerned with belief rather than truth, with “what admits of being otherwise.” Unlike wisdom, the content of judgment is not always the same, as it focuses more on particulars than on universals, builds on experience, and often requires deliberation.¹⁷ For Aristotle, sound judgments must reflect the nature of their objects. For instance, judgments about using a knife must take account of its natural function to cut. But what if the judgment is to deal with a human? Aristotle seeks an answer by stressing the rational function of the human species. For humans to live in accord with their nature, they must live in accord with right reason. To live in harmony with reason is to live virtuously. Thinking virtuously requires the intellectual virtues, while acting virtu-

¹⁵ See: Melissa A. Chase, “Should Coaches Believe in Innate Ability? The Importance of Leadership Mindset,” op. cit., p. 299.

¹⁶ Nannerl O. Keohane, “On Leadership,” op. cit., p. 707.

¹⁷ Id., p. 710.

ously requires what are called the moral virtues. Together, for they cannot operate without one another, they make up a virtuous man whose judgments always seek for and follow the golden mean. So then, if a leader is to be a man of excellent judgment, he or she must try to make his or her decisions between two extremes: a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency.¹⁸

Moving Willingly

Is *influence* a key concept in defining leadership? For some it seems to be both a necessary and sufficient factor in explaining leadership, so that they regard it as the behavioral process of influencing individuals and groups toward set goals, or as individuals who can significantly influence the thoughts, behaviors, and feelings of other people.¹⁹ If so, then what kind of influence may be recognized as proper – that of a businessman, politician, manager, or official? If leadership were equated with economic success and managing people, then it would be measured by success and effectiveness in obtaining these ends. A leader would be successful when the person he or she is trying to influence demonstrates the desired behavior. Is this right? If leadership were reduced to management, then successful leaders would have to use power – to influence others, to monitor results, and to sanction performance. Is this really so? If leadership were to be replaced by authority understood in the political sense, then such authority would be able to command others, control subordinates, and make all the truly important decisions by itself. Would we like this?²⁰ Probably not!

Harry S. Truman, in saying that “leadership is the ability to get others to willingly move,” implies that *leader* means something more than *boss*. Although a position as a manager, director, president, etc. gives the authority to accomplish certain objectives in the organization or society, the power of an office does not make anyone a leader immediately; it can merely make a commander. Leadership, rather than simply bossing people around, makes followers want to do great things.²¹ This is why leadership has to be based on some kind of honesty. The leader must have an honest understanding of who he or she is, what he or she knows, and what he or she can do. For it is the follow-

¹⁸ Paul Stonehouse, Peter Allison, David Carr, “Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates: Ancient Greek perspectives on experiential learning,” in *Beyond Dewey and Hahn: Standing on the shoulders of influential experiential educators*, ed. T. Smith, C. Knapp (Wisconsin: Raccoon Institute Publications, 2009): pp. 29-41.

¹⁹ See: Melissa A. Chase, “Should Coaches Believe in Innate Ability? The Importance of Leadership Mindset,” op. cit., p. 297.

²⁰ Cf.: Richard A. Barker, “How Can We Train Leaders if We Do Not Know What Leadership Is?,” op. cit., p. 344.

²¹ *Concepts of Leadership*, <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/leadcon.html> – accessed Aug 06, 2011.

ers, not the leader, who determine if the leader is successful. The main leadership distinction and attraction consists in using no coercive methods. If the followers lose their trust or confidence in the leader, it would mean that they become mere employees, hired men, or servants. Thus, to be successful, the leader has to convince the followers, not himself or his or her superiors, that he or she is worthy of being followed.²²

Why then are leaders followed? There are two main reasons. The first one refers to the leader who usually is admired and followed for having some kind of knowledge or skill which he is ready to share with others. When the leader's knowledge is considered, then it cannot be conceived as merely technical, specialized, or routinely possessed by followers. The leader's knowledge rests not only on training, but also, or rather in particular, on discovery and experience. As a result, the difference between leaders and other people reflects both the amount of accumulated knowledge, and the qualitative dissimilarity in its organization, which allows rapid and reliable retrieval of the knowledge whenever stored information is relevant. Therefore, both experience and the ordering of it to make it easily available at appropriate times seem to be crucial for being a genuine leader.²³

Another reason refers to the followers who usually are very willing to invest themselves in a leader's proposal if it bears personal meaning for them. If they can escape from being over-managed and begin to make a cooperative investment through their labor, they will likely make a more efficient and complete contribution.²⁴ It is not unlikely that, in time, these followers who have some leadership predispositions can reach their leader's level and collaborate with him in accomplishing such critical tasks as setting direction, creating alignment, or gaining commitment.²⁵

The importance of voluntary cooperation between leaders and followers can be easily demonstrated by history. Arnold J. Toynbee, a renowned historian and philosopher of history, examined the rise and fall of 26 civilizations in the course of human history. He concluded that they rose by responding successfully to challenges under the leadership of creative minorities composed of elite leaders. The power of leaders was ensured by the practice whereby their example was imitated by the followers. Civilizations declined when the thread of

²² Id.

²³ Cf.: Nannerl O. Keohane, "On Leadership," op. cit., p. 716; Thomas Aquinas, "The Teacher," in *Disputed Questions on Truth*, vol. 2, transl. Robert W. Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), p. 527: "Now, in discovery, the procedure of anyone who arrives at the knowledge of something unknown is to apply general selfevident principles to certain definite matters, from these to proceed to particular conclusions, and from these to others."

²⁴ Steven B. Sample, "Leadership," op. cit., p. 1255.

²⁵ See: Gina Hernez-Broome, Richard L. Hughes, "Leadership Development: Past, Present, and Future," *Human Resources Planning* (March, 2004), p. 31.

agreement and cooperation among leaders, and between leaders and followers was broken, and the cultural elite turned parasitic, exploiting each other, or creating a proletariat.²⁶

New Directions

At the beginning of his *Politics*, Aristotle makes a careful point that “every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always acts in order to obtain that which they think good.”²⁷ In the case of leadership, it seems that there are only two pretenders for choosing ultimate good for others: history or leaders.

In the opinion of Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian novelist, it is history that shapes and determines human conduct, including that of leaders. In the epilogue to his *War and Peace*, he wrote: “Every act of theirs [i.e., leaders], which appears to them an act of their own free will, is in an historical sense involuntary and is related to the whole cause of history and predestined from eternity”. Tolstoy believed that both leaders and their followers are merely history’s slaves who were set in motion by countless forces beyond their control or comprehension.

In opposition to Tolstoy, Thomas Carlyle, the influential British historian and essayist, maintained that history is the biography of great men, the greatest of them being kings. The very word *king* Carlyle derived from the ancient word *Canning*, which he translated with “Able-man”. Thus, in Carlyle’s view, Ablemen (or Ablewomen) direct the course of history and determine the destiny of humanity.

Having appreciated the advantages of the Tolstoyan and Carlylean approaches, Steven B. Sample, in his article in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, concludes that “leadership tends to be remarkably situational and contingent: what works for one person at one point in time will not necessarily work for everyone else or even for that person at a different time.”²⁸ To be situational and contingent in the absolute way, however, leadership would have to transcend human nature, which is impossible unless in the imaginary world. If leaders and their actual or potential followers possess the same human nature, then they are not only determined by the set of their natural predispositions, but also called to realize their optimum. The existence of human nature enables us to think, and to conclude that the ultimate end of life is to be determined not by

²⁶ See: Peter Jones, “Toynbee, Arnold Joseph (1889-1975),” in Justin Wintle, *Makers of modern culture* (London-New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 522; Glenn N. Schram, “Western Civilization in the Light of the Philosophy of History,” *Modern Age* (Fall 1990): pp. 253-254; Suck-Chul Yoon, “Toynbee’s Philosophy of History Adapted for Business Management. A Case Study and Theorization,” *Seoul Journal of Business* 9 (December 2003): pp. 27.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 1, transl. Benjamin Jowett (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), p. 3.

²⁸ Steven B. Sample, “Leadership,” op. cit., pp. 1254-1256.

history or a leader, but found, chosen, and pursued by that individual who is aware of his or her own natural endowment and ultimately responsible for it. All the particular ends gain logical sense if they serve as means to the ultimate. Such a perspective brings untapped new fountains of energy and creativity both to leaders and their followers.²⁹

In the respect of setting new directions for human engagement, the relation between leaders and followers becomes analogous to that between teachers and students. For as teachers have to decide whether they will teach the subject as such, or teach the students how to get it for themselves, so similarly the leaders face the necessity of deciding whether they will lead the followers to achieve the required end for the sake of the end itself, or rather that of those who are to achieve it – in other words, whether the followers exist for the end or the end for the followers, whether the system makes the men or the men make the system, etc.³⁰ Certainly, the leadership students strive for acquiring maximum efficiency in the accomplishment of their future ends. But at the same time, they cannot stop thinking of the future responsibility for their actual potential followers. Let this thought never cease! Actually, neither efficiency nor responsibility, when taken separately, can be regarded as necessary and sufficient constituents of genuine leadership. Genuine leaders will always try to put them in tandem.

Conclusion

The motto of this presentation recalls the famous saying of Bernard of Chartres. As was noted by John of Salisbury in his *Metalogicon*,

“Bernard of Chartres used to say that we are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than they, and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and raised up by their giant size.”³¹

Each philosopher is to be aware of how much he or she owes to the philosophers who lived before. The philosophers of the present generation are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, for – in order to develop future

²⁹ Cf.: Mieczysław A. Krapiec, *Suwerennosc – czyja?* (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 2001), p. 53.

³⁰ Cf. Glenn James, “The Subject or the Student,” *National Mathematics Magazine* 13 (December 1938, No. 3): pp. 129-130.

³¹ „Dicebat Bernardus Carnotensis nos esse quasi nanos, gigantium humeris insidentes, ut possimus plura eis et remotiora videre, non utique proprii visus acumine, aut eminentia corporis, sed quia in altum subvenimur et extollimur magnitudine gigantea”. See *The Yale Book of Quotations*, ed. Fred E. Shapiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 57; Frederick W. Hall, *A Companion to Classical Texts* (Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company, 1988), p. 70; Robert K. Merton, *On The Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

intellectual pursuits – they have to understand the research and work created by notable thinkers of the past.

Since its very beginning philosophy has been pursuing knowledge and the understanding of human nature. The respect for nature is a crucial feature of the genuine philosopher who does his or her best to proclaim and implement it wherever possible. With referring to Harry S. Truman's account of leadership, all we intended was to make an appeal for paying closer attention to human nature in educating genuine leaders. Well-educated leaders, who know not to confuse the ultimate end with particular ones in their own life and in that of others, are needed throughout the Western civilization and elsewhere. They are desired by the economic leadership which sometimes seems to be mired in an obsession with the rich and powerful, with the traits, characteristics, behaviors, roles, styles, and abilities of people who *per fas et nefas* have obtained high positions and profits.³² They are very much wanted in education, whose dramatic situation in the global scale was acutely described by Peter A. Redpath in the introduction to his book, *Cartesian Nightmare*. Here he wrote:

“Skeptical philosophers, atheistic theologians, illiterate professors of English, psychologists who do not believe in the existence of a soul, social scientists who are not scientific, teachers of business courses who have never run a business, chemists who are really physicists, physicists who are really mathematicians, university administrators and teachers of education who lack a basic training in the very subjects which for centuries have constituted the curriculum of a university but who are now directing our institutions of higher learning, these are the inhabitants who not uncommonly reside in that very medium which shapes the development of all of the other contemporary Western cultural institutions.”³³

Despite, however, all these dramas, the wisdom of philosophical giants brings us today a fresh hope, that the sooner leadership schools recover the knowledge about human nature in their curricula, the sooner their graduates (i.e., genuine leaders) will retrieve culture for human persons.

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL REMARKS ON EDUCATING GENUINE LEADERS

SUMMARY

The author intends to make an appeal for paying closer attention to human nature in educating genuine leaders. His philosophical approach embraces following topics: (1) whether leaders are born with talents and traits that allow, or even cause, them to be successful leaders, or whether effective leadership behaviors can be learned through education and experience; (2) whether the influence exercised by groups or individuals can be considered as a necessary and sufficient

³² Cf.: Richard A. Barker, “How Can We Train Leaders if We Do Not Know What Leadership Is?,” op. cit., p. 344.

³³ Peter A. Redpath, *Cartesian Nightmare* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 1997), p. 3.

factor in explaining leadership; (3) whether leaders lead the followers to achieve the required end for the sake of the end itself, or rather that of those who are to achieve it – in other words, whether the followers exist for the end or the end for the followers. The author concludes that well-educated leaders are those who know not to confuse the ultimate end with particular ones in their own life and in that of others.

KEYWORDS: leader, leadership, education, philosophy, human nature.