

# Are leaders born or made? New study shows how leadership develops

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Hardly a day passes without pundits crying for leadership in the NFL commissioner and team owners, among high-ranking government officials, and in other public figures. If University of Illinois experts didn't have evidence that this valuable trait can be taught, they might join the collective swoon that's engulfing much of the country.

But a new U of I study supports the idea that leaders are made, not born, and that [leadership](#) development follows a specific progression.

Past research suggests that leadership is 30 percent genetic and 70 percent a result of lessons learned through life experiences. Given these percentages, U of I professors Kari Keating, David Rosch, and Lisa Burgoon suggest a more efficient pathway to [leadership development](#).

"In only 15 weeks in our introductory class, students reported significant gains in three important components of leadership: self-efficacy, or confidence in their ability to lead; skills; and motivation to lead," said Keating, who teaches leadership courses in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences' agricultural leadership education major.

The new study shows that science is involved in teaching leadership development, Rosch said.

"It's a three-legged stool: we call it being ready, willing, and able. Students first become ready to learn about being a leader; then they

become willing to learn the skills necessary to practice leadership; and finally they're able to lead because they have the skills and the motivation to do it. You can't really move on to the other legs of the stool until you've achieved a certain amount of this readiness," he explained.

If students enter the course with low levels of self-efficacy—saying 'I don't really think of myself as a leader' or 'I'm not confident in my abilities'—they don't increase in being willing and able in 15 weeks, but they make big increases in readiness, he added.

"It's like a math class. You're not ready to do calculus if you don't know the basics of algebra," he noted. "This shows us we need to work on readiness so students can make the most of advanced leadership courses."

Students who come into the introductory class with leadership readiness saying, "I've got this, I'm a leader" have a different learning experience. They become willing to lead people even when it's not a big resume builder, Keating said.

So what is leadership? "Historically, leaders have been viewed as being male and power oriented. It used to be if you were tall, articulate, and well-schooled, you were a leader in other people's minds," Burgoon said.

And students often take a positional view of leadership. "But, just as a year in a cave doesn't make you a geologist, being senior class president doesn't make you a leader," Rosch said.

But leadership is more than that, he said. "The definition we use in the course is that leadership is an individual influencing a group of people toward a common goal. So how do you influence people? You can lead through your interactions, your relationships, your communication, the

way you express thanks, your ethics," he said.

"Leadership isn't done in a vacuum. It's done with others," Keating added.

Students in the class complete 10 to 12 self-assessments to learn where their own strengths and weaknesses as a leader lie. By the end of the semester, they may say: "I don't do any of this relationship stuff. I'm mainly authoritative in the way I lead. Maybe I need to alter what I'm doing so our team can get better results," she said.

Rosch said every semester a dozen students come back to him from job interviews in which they advanced because they were able to demonstrate and talk about leadership. He added that academic advisers are beginning to recommend leadership courses to students who aren't in the leadership major or minor.

"If we could pre-test [students](#) for leadership proficiency in much the same way we test for chemistry placement, we'd be able to make our resources more efficient and maximize the learning potential that we have in our program," he noted.

**More information:** The study was published in the summer issue of *Journal of Leadership Education*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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