
Who can teach leadership?

By [Gianpiero Petriglieri](#)

Mel's hand went up precipitously and unexpectedly, like thunder on a clear day. I had barely begun introducing the leadership course I would be teaching over the coming weeks. "I have a question, Professor." I gave him the floor.

"What makes you think you can teach us to lead?"

I looked around. A roomful of puzzled managers silently stared back. Five minutes into our first class, my students were already questioning leadership. Mine. Mel had looked me up on the web and learned that I had spent one decade training as a medical doctor and psychiatrist and another working in business schools. I have researched leadership, taught and coached thousands of MBAs and executives, consulted and directed leadership programs for global organizations. None of it had escaped Google's microscope, revealing an issue that Mel wanted me to own: I am an academic.

Engaged as I am with private and public organizations, I have never started, owned, or managed a business. No share price ever soared, no product went to market, no enterprise downsized under (alongside, or despite) my stewardship. This made me — in Mel's eyes — dubiously qualified to teach leadership.

Mel is fictional — none of my students have ever asked that question so openly, so clearly, so early. But by the end of each course, many admit to wondering the same thing. My background, my profession, the skills and accomplishments I am proud of — for the Mel in my classes, eager to climb corporate heights — are like sins I slowly atone for.

As managers flock to courses that promise to transform them into leaders, Mel's question lingers in many business school classrooms and corporate auditoria. Some teachers pre-empt it by emphasizing their corporate experience or casually dropping names of CEOs they have met. Others by

pointing out that it is not their job to teach anyone to lead. Rather it is to provide opportunities for students to learn it themselves. Many find solace in the fact that the question will likely remain unspoken, tiptoed around like the proverbial elephant in the room.

That is a pity. Who can teach, or help us learn, to lead is an important question. One that deserves tackling head-on because it offers an opportunity to dispel two problematic assumptions and uncover a fundamental truth about learning to lead.

The first assumption is that leading means occupying a senior managerial position. The fallacy of this equation is apparent if you look back to executives you have met. Were they all leaders? Were they all leaders who could teach, and that you would eagerly learn from? Chances are, some were and some weren't. The second assumption is that leading is learned by the transmission of advice or personal examples from those who have led to those who are yet to lead. There is value in yielding to the lessons of role models. Emulation alone, however, a leader does not make. Neither do theories, as much as they help.

We learn to lead through the experience of leading — and following. Even if “leader” has never been your job title, you have surely led, at work and outside of it. If you are like most managers I meet, in fact, you spend more time leading than learning. Your career is so fast-flowing and high-pressure that you have little time and space to distill lasting lessons from your experience. And that is where leadership courses can add much value — by offering an opportunity to examine your history, habits and mores from some distance and in the company of others who may not share your context and your views. That improves how we lead by enhancing how we learn .

In a [recent study](#), [Jennifer Petriglieri](#), Jack Wood and I found that working with professionals who espoused different perspectives and values helped managers question, and learn more deeply from, their own experience — building the personal foundations required to lead mindfully, effectively and responsibly. Whatever qualifications and work history a teacher (or a coach) may have, then, matters less than their ability to help you maximize your return on experience.

Will your course, your teachers, your classmates, help you approach, examine and draw meaningful lessons from your experience past and present? Will they take your experience seriously without taking your

conclusions literally? Will they challenge you to take a second look at things you usually take for granted, or rush over? Will they provoke you to articulate, broaden or revise the views you have of yourself, leading, and the world? Will you be open and committed to that work? These are the questions you should ask anytime you're enlisting someone to help you become a better leader.

Seen from this perspective, Mel's question is not about familiarity with business. It is about trust. In a new environment, faced with complex and potentially uncomfortable challenges — and scrutinizing our experience is such a challenge — we naturally look at the person in front of the room and wonder how trustworthy they are. We wonder whether they will listen, understand our views and take them on board. We wonder more the less familiar that person appears. If I don't look like what you expect, you may trust me less until I prove that I understand and value your concerns and aspirations — that I can help assuage the former and achieve the latter.

That is only fair. I welcome that scrutiny — uncomfortable as it may be, it comes with the privilege of my job — especially if it is driven by skepticism rather than cynicism. The former blends mistrust with curiosity, the latter with preconceived rejection. We inevitably encounter both skepticism and cynicism when we are entrusted with the privilege to lead. Today I may be under the microscope. Tomorrow it will be you. Full of hope and good intentions, you will walk into a room as the designated leader, putting a face to the name people Googled just yesterday. You will need to gain the trust of a group that includes members with whom you may have little in common. Someone may ask, more or less overtly, what makes you think you can lead. Do not resent them for it. That's what you signed up for. Whatever you may have done before, what matters most is what you will do next. That day you may remember a leadership course that honoured fair scrutiny and did not circumvent the question of trust. The kind of course, that is, where one may really learn to lead.

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