

# Leadership: Nature or Nurture?

By Phaedra Brotherton

**Executives' beliefs about leadership qualities can shape the perception and acceptance of leadership development efforts.**

Are leaders born or made? That question was recently explored by the Center for Creative Leadership in its recent study, *Are Leaders Born or Made? Perspectives from the Executive Suite*. More than 300 C-level executives were interviewed to get their thoughts on the age-old question.

"Believing people are 'born' leaders is likely to result in a focus more on selection (identify the right people) rather than on development (develop the people you get). On the other hand, believing that people are made into leaders by their experiences would be more likely to result in a greater focus on making sure people had the right opportunity to develop into leaders," according to the report.

Survey respondents were from 53 different countries, with 64 percent from the United States. Men made up 69 percent of the sample, with women at 37 percent. The survey asked respondents to rate how much they thought leadership was determined by inborn traits or by developing into leaders.

About 19 percent believe leaders are born; 52 percent believe they are made; and 29 percent believe they are equally born and made.

The survey also asked C-level executives what they felt were the most important elements of leadership: traits, experiences, or training. Those who believe leaders are made ranked the elements as follows: experiences, training, then traits. On the other hand, those who believe that leaders are born ranked the

elements as follows: traits, experiences, then training.

"This shows that Mades think that what people learn over time is more important to their development than do Borns. At the same time, Borns (not surprisingly) place substantially more importance on traits than do Mades," notes the report.

Both borns and mades believe that learning from experience is key to developing good leaders. The difference, notes the report, is focus. "Borns are likely to think that organizations should be very selective in who gets developmental opportunities, offering them only to those whom leaders believe are most likely to benefit from them."

Knowing how executives perceive leadership is helpful in framing the benefits of leadership development programs. For instance if a CEO believes leaders are born, learning professionals might suggest an early identification program in combination with on-the-job stretch assignments. On the other hand, if the C-suite believes that leaders are made, ensuring that leadership development is broad-based and inclusive would be important.

Regardless of which way the C-suite leans, the study confirms that learning pros can help improve "leadership bench strength by providing people with access to varied developmental experiences."

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## The BIG Number

# 52%

The percentage of C-Level executives who believe that leaders are made through experiences and developmental opportunities.

### >> Which Is Most Important in Creating a Leader: Traits, Experiences, or Training?

**Those who believe leaders are born:**

Traits—41%

Experiences—38%

Training—21%

**Those who believe leaders are made:**

Experiences—46%

Training—35%

Traits—20%

Source: *Are Leaders Born or Made? Perspectives from the Executive Suite*, Center for Creative Leadership, 2012



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