

# Leaders ' Personalities: Determined or Developed?

A significant portion of my work as an executive coach involves assisting existing and emerging leaders to accept themselves. A big part of who they are, the part they often need to fully embrace, is their personality. The following question frequently comes up, "Is my personality inherited or developed?" Before I answer that question, let me define some important terms.

**Personality** is a reference to individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving. It is a reference to the type of person each one of us is, thinking holistically about how we tend to be in the world.

Temperament is a little different, though often the two terms are confused or even used synonymously. **Temperament** refers to the innate or inherited characteristics we possess, our constitutional predisposition. In the famous nature-nurture debate, temperament belongs to the category of nature. Personality includes both.

The nature-nurture debate is over. Neither side won, but we know much more than we did prior to the advent of modern science. What we know definitively is that about 50 percent of our personality can be connected to inheritance. Twin studies, in particular, have confirmed this reality over and over. The other 50 percent of our personality is connected to our life experiences and our responses. A big portion of this is connected to early life (especially in the first two years) and even prenatal experiences. The rest occurs over the entire life span. Interestingly, the research suggests that non-shared experiences of twins (especially traumatic ones if present), not their shared family experiences, account for the greater part of the variance in the second 50 percent of

personality traits. This means that our personality is partially plastic or malleable, but that innate temperament limits our options somewhat.

There are still vestiges of the philosophy of John Locke in our society. Locke taught that human beings come into the world as blank slates (*tabula rasa*). The popular version of this thinking suggests that each person can be whatever and whoever they want to be, that there are no limitations on them. Our hard drive, comparing ourselves to a computer, comes unformatted and blank. Science has obliterated this view. We all come with a pre-loaded operating system of sorts called temperament.

The answer to the question above is *both-and*. (By the way, this is more often than not the answer to most debates that have continued for centuries.) Our personality, the whole set of characteristic traits that we possess, results from the combination of *nature*, our inherited temperament, and *nurture*, our life experiences, responses and choices. At least 50 percent of who we are can be traced back to temperament. The rest is the result of our development, built on top of that natural temperament, over time. You could state the equation like this: our personality = our temperament + our acquired personality traits in our environment. We can determine who we become within a limited context determined by our temperament. We're not blank slates and we're not pre-determined. We live between these two unrealistic extremes. Both nature and nurture matter; neither determines alone.

This understanding is highly relevant to the topic of leadership and personal development. I recently had the opportunity to work with a group of first-year MBA students at a leading university. My job was to have a coaching conversation with each of my assigned 25 students about their personality traits and their leadership development path. Not surprising to me, most of the students talked about wanting to change their personality (or even their temperament). Those

who were less naturally extroverted, felt pressure to become more so to succeed as future leaders. The bias favoring extroversion as a requisite trait of leaders was in full display. Based on what we know, those students would be setting themselves up for disappointment if they set out to become someone they aren't. As a secondary consequence, the future organizations in which they will lead would miss the natural talents and strengths that spring from their different but needed temperament. The answer? Help those students understand the beauty and value of who they are, not what the culture tells them to be.

In light of this discussion, here is a healthy way to view your temperament, your personality and your own personal leadership potential:

**1. Know yourself.**

Who are you? What is your temperament? What are your natural talents and strengths? Limitations? What does the world need that you are naturally good at? How has the other 50 percent of your personality developed?

**2. Accept yourself.**

Once I know who I am (and who I'm not) naturally, I need to accept myself and my place in the world. If I don't do this, I will spend my life trying to be someone else.

This is not only exhausting, it's inherently problematic and won't ultimately work.

**3. Create yourself.**

Within reason and in light of your temperament, you can choose to develop parts of yourself that will increase your leadership of others. What can you realistically do to develop into the leader you are capable of becoming? What skills can you develop that are built on top of natural temperamental strengths?

**4. Lead authentically.**

When I know who I am, am comfortable with that awareness, am continuing to develop into the best

version of myself, I can now confidently and unapologetically lead others from my authentic self.

Authentic leadership is self-aware, relationally transparent, honest about strengths and weaknesses, and guided by deep character and congruence.

Understanding the nature of personality, temperament and their respective development is critical to the leader's journey.