

Leadership is not democratized.

We need to change this.



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Key ideas:

- 1) Is learning on the job through trial and error fine for all professions ?
- 2) As adults, we associate wrongly failure with low self-esteem, so we become risk-averse, less resilient, and we shy away from people and things that challenge us.
- 3) What all past civilizations strived to do was maximizing our potential as humans by being creative, collaborative, and problem-solvers.

Here's a simple question: what did school teach you? Take a minute to reflect. I posed the same question to my online friends, which is a more diverse group than my real friends. The answers varied from general knowledge to self-awareness to social skills. And that's great. Not one answered *leadership skills*.

Should one of the many purposes of school be the cultivation of leadership skills?

For some reason, we tend to treat leadership as something that is beyond the reach of laypeople.

Leadership is taught at Ivy League universities, MBA schools, and invite-only conferences, because only the best of us need to develop leadership skills.

Nurses, teachers, food servers, farmers, social workers, taxi drivers don't need leadership development; they just need to do their job. Politicians and corporate executives make high-impact decisions, so they need leadership development.

Is this true, though?

Let's take a taxi driver as an example. I see a number of leadership skills that can be very important to them: developing business acumen (to run their

business), flexibility (to improvise in a hectic workload), time management (to balance potentially conflicting schedules), communication skills (to create a pleasant customer experience), having difficult conversations (to handle demanding or unreasonable customers), and even strategic thinking (to navigate a highly competitive environment being occupied by tech companies).

Where are taxi drivers learning these skills? Probably on the job, through trial and error. They may lose some money before they develop business acumen, miss some fares because they overestimated time, and argue with customers because of a misunderstanding that will lead to a low rating.

This may be fine for a taxi driver, but is learning on the job through trial and error fine for a nurse? Is a stressful environment with vulnerable patients the best place to learn time management and prioritization given the dire consequences one wrong decision may have?

What if they had learned these skills in school?

One of the activities that all levels of leaders enjoy in a classroom training is the [marshmallow challenge](#). The objective is to build the tallest standing structure with a marshmallow on the top, using 20

sticks of spaghetti, tape, string, and one marshmallow — all within 18 minutes. Participants need to think quickly, brainstorm, and build the structure. Naturally, things get heated quickly. Some people have strong ideas and try to impose on others. Some agree, some compromise, some quit. The clock is ticking, and the teams haven't yet built anything. Spaghettis break, the string is too short, the marshmallow is too heavy. Time is up. Some structures still stand, but some leaders are annoyed, others are already on their phone, disengaged. They didn't feel valued enough to invest more effort.

Who do you think performs better in the marshmallow challenge: kindergarten students or business school graduates?

It's the kindergarten students, and [it should be no surprise](#). They are builders and problem-solvers, creative, collaborative, resilient, curious, they listen to others and are not afraid to fail. All these, believe it or not, are leadership skills. They come naturally to us. All we could do is build upon them in school; since we don't, we grow out of them. Our growth mindset becomes fixed.

As adults, we associate failure with low self-esteem, so we become risk-averse, less resilient, and we shy away from people and things that challenge us. We get so self-absorbed that our ability to be self-aware and empathetic is impaired. We have no idea though, unless someone else points it out. They will not though, because we rarely ask for feedback. We didn't learn to. In school, we got formal feedback twice per year, and unsolicited feedback from friends and family, mostly in a negative manner. No surprise our first reaction to feedback is defensiveness. Providing meaningful and constructive feedback is also a skill that no one was taught in school.

When we enter the workplace, we realize that these skills are key to professional success. Experienced corporate leaders who have been educated

in business schools [attend development programs](#) to learn how to be agile and self-aware, make decisions, regulate their emotions, actively listen, build trust, request and provide feedback, manage time, prioritize, motivate others.

Learning in middle age something we could have developed in school means less time for practicing complex leadership skills, e.g. strategic thinking, hiring and developing others, scaling as leaders, executive presence. These skills are highly nuanced, they require professional expertise, a big picture mindset, and a deep understanding of how people operate. We could put all our energy in acquiring those, only if we have mastered the basic leadership skills at a younger age.

The reason we should start in school is that it mirrors tomorrow's society. It is where all future professionals, laborers, academics, artists, and athletes meet today. It is the best place to kick off the democratization of leadership.

In my view, as a leadership development professional in a large corporation you all know, it would take three things to achieve the “**students as leaders**” mission:

- Having a long-term strategy on fostering leadership in school.
- Reimagining the role and profile of teachers.
- Getting all parties, including parents, to identify opportunities that encourage students to exercise leadership during and outside school hours.

This is far from a fully-fledged proposal. My main goal here is to show that we should democratize leadership starting now. It is not only good for our children and our society; [it is good for business](#) and our future economy. What all past civilizations strived to do was maximizing our potential as humans by being creative, collaborative, and problem-solvers. We followed their path. Let's now lay a new path and lead the way for the future generations starting with our own children.