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THE EDULETTER FOR TEAM LEADERS
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Opportunity Can Make a Leader

The leader's job, after all, is not to provide energy but to release it from others.
—Francis Hesselbein

Everyone knows a story about a highly intelligent, highly skilled assistant coach who was promoted into a head coaching position only to fail. And likewise, we are all familiar with the story about someone with a solid background—though not particularly blessed with an out of this world IQ—who was promoted to a head coaching position and then soared. This same dynamic takes place in all types of organizations. On the surface it makes sense to conclude some people are just born to succeed as leaders.

Most decision-makers continue to look for the individual with the “right stuff” to place in leadership positions. Because we cling to the idea that leadership comes naturally to those that have succeeded in such positions we miss the chance to elevate people through something simple, yet profound. Opportunity. Far too often we prematurely write people off as unqualified simply because we're convinced that leadership is innate—you either have it or you don't.

Scientists recognize that the tallest oak in the forest is not the tallest because it grew from the best acorn. Rather, it is the tallest because the seed landed in fertile soil. And as a sapling it was able to get ample sunlight, was spared from destructive winds, fire, and animals that might chew through the fragile stock.

The seed and the soil work together. Sure, the acorn had to meet certain threshold capacity in order to thrive in its environment, but beyond that it's evident that the tallest trees in the forest got that way primarily because they had the opportunity to reach their potential.

Life Stream and Leadership Development

For ages, people have debated if leaders are made or born. To cast your vote for one side or the other is certain to invite disagreement. However, I have found that one thing is certain, with quality opportunities people can acquire and improve upon their leadership competencies.

In his radical book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell's research on the topic of success turns up some very surprising insights—at least surprising to those willing to listen and learn. As he closes his book Gladwell succinctly summarizes his findings. “Everything we have learned in *Outliers* says that success follows a predictable course. It is not the brightest who succeed...Nor is it simply the sum of the decisions and efforts we make on our own behalf. It is, rather, a gift. Outliers are those who have been given opportunities—and who have the strength and presence of mind to seize them.”

Peter Drucker was a true genius. He was an amazing thinker that shaped much of modern management. Drucker compellingly stated, “Leadership is a skill that can, and must, be learned.” As a teacher of the *world's* leaders, Drucker didn't see a need to enter into the nature vs. nurture debate. He simply declared that leadership can be learned. And as we know from experience, teachers (anyone capable of influencing) play a role in the learning process. Developmentally, the experiences that can be most potent are the ones that stretch people, but also have an element of support.

Learning is a developmental process that intersects with other developmental processes in a person's life. Think for a moment about someone you know personally that you consider a leader—a parent, a colleague, a supervisor. What would they tell you about their opportunities to lead and how the opportunities and people have shaped who they are and how they lead? The life stream one travels is vital to leadership growth and development. Opportunity, challenge, and support are necessary for a student-athlete to realize his or her leadership potential.

Gladwell suggests, “To build a better world we need to replace the patchwork of lucky breaks and arbitrary advantages that today determine success—with a society that provides opportunities for all.” To borrow from Francis Hesselbein, the coach's job, after all, is not to provide energy but to release it from others.