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### Leadership: The great man theory revisited

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#### Abstract

In the early 1980s, a doctoral candidate at Indiana University, teaching for the first time an undergraduate course in organizational behavior, was casting about for some device with which to rouse his students' interest in "leadership." Deciding to play a really long shot, he called IU's Athletic Office in an attempt to reach basketball coach Bob Knight and engage him as a guest speaker for the class. The coach was out of the office, so the instructor left a message indicating his request and waited for a call. No return call came for several days. The instructor was not really surprised; he knew all along the odds were against Coach Knight having the time to provide this service, however much he might be interested in doing it. Then, to his astonishment, Knight called a couple of days before the topic of leadership was scheduled and said yes, he would be glad to speak to the class on leadership, and that they should come to a classroom at the athletic facilities complex. As Knight took the podium, he told the business students, "The first thing you people need to know about leadership is that most of you simply don't have it in you." Chances are good that this statement blatantly contradicted what the students had read in their textbooks. The fashionable party line in those days was

Leadership is not a trait, it is learned behavior and has little to do with innate personal qualities. The Great Man (or Woman) notion of leadership was said to be anecdotal and unscientific. Fortunately, in light of new evidence, a fair assessment of the old data, and, most notably, a willingness to admit what everyday observation and common sense tell us, management scholars and organizational psychologists now feel comfortable again with the idea that some people—whether by innate qualities, distinctive experiences, or some combination of both—simply have more than others of this “right stuff” required for leadership. In other words, it seems we have caught up with Coach Knight in this regard.



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