

Minding the Gaps: The Most Strategic Approach to Improve Society

By Alan E. Nelson



Alan E. Nelson, EdD has a doctorate in leadership from the University of San Diego. He teaches at the University of Southern California and the Naval Postgraduate School and is the Los Angeles Chair of the Institute for Management Studies. Alan is the author of 20 books and 200 articles and is the founder of LeadYoung Training Systems. His most recent book, [The O Factor: Identifying and Developing Students Gifted in Leadership Ability](#), summarizes his work on leadership ability gifting among 3-23 year olds. Alan lives near Los Angeles, California. He can be reached at dralanenelson@gmail.com.

For the most part, proven organizational leaders refer to early leadership experiences when asked when they first began to see their own leadership ability. The stories of being the middle school student body president, or soccer team captain, or even a frequent flyer to the principal's office, are common themes among those who lead as adults. Consider asking these four questions of the organizational leaders you know:

1. As you look at your childhood, when did you first recognize leadership ability?
2. Describe an example of when you led as a student.
3. How did your leadership ability get rewarded or punished, growing up?
4. Who saw your leadership ability as a young person?

This article could be titled, "The Tale of Two Gaps." Those who've traveled to the UK understand the audible and visual warnings to passengers, to take caution while crossing the gap between the train door and the station. This article is about two significant gaps related to leadership development in the 21st century. The first has to do with the growing concern in quality and quantity of leaders emerging, ready to fill the void of retiring Baby Boomers, let alone the burgeoning environ of new and growing organizations. The other is related to its long-term solution, how we're going about identifying and developing very young talent in this field.

Gap #1

According to a Deloitte study, reported in *Forbes*, one of the top three things keeping CEO's awake at night is an inadequate leadership pipeline (Bersin, 2014). While leadership development is typically a big deal in organizations, the looming retirement of huge numbers of Baby Boomers in management is creating a potential cataclysmic condition in many organizations. In my new role as the Los Angeles Chair of the Institute for Management Studies, I'm becoming familiar with very large organizations in Southern California. Several leadership development execs state that 50-75% of their managers now qualify for retirement. As a result, many of these organizations are ramping up for significant hires, yet developing this new talent to function as leaders is quite a different issue.

So how do we “mind the gap” looming large between those now occupying leadership roles and millennials not yet vetted for greater influence? Traditionally, leadership development is a haphazard and subjective process, whereby organizational employees/members get identified as potential leaders. All too often, this takes several years to take place. A study of 17,000 managers, noted in the *Harvard Business Review*, reported that the average age of when someone’s first formal leadership training occurs is 42, significantly past the time when humans are pliable in their character and elevated in their cognitions (Zenger, 2012). An emerging segment of leaders would seemingly like to start the search much younger. A survey conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership of 462 leaders from all sectors of the economy globally noted that 50% suggested starting leadership training by age 10 and 96% agreed it should initiate by 21 (Van Velsor & Wright, 2015). Yet, practically no serious research or impetus has focused on very young leaders even though we know that all great organizational leaders were at one time children, tweens, and teens.

Ten years ago, during a midlife transition, I came to the conclusion that leadership development is wasted on adults, who are past their prime in developmental pliability. Adults have already developed their habits, many of them bad, and they’re consumed with day-to-day issues distracting them from growth. Justifying the ROI of leadership development expenses in adults is a perennial issue.

The Marland Report

In 1972, the U.S. Department of Education published an assessment on gifted and talented education (Marland, 1972). The original motivation for such a study came from the nation’s concern about developing the best talent to compete with others, such as Russia’s success with Sputnik. Dr. Sid Marland, who served as an Army Colonel in WWII, was an English teacher, superintendent of Pittsburgh schools, and then the commissioner of education, followed by the presidency of the College Entrance Examination Board (now known as the College Board). His personal wiring as a leader, combined with his multifaceted view of leadership in the military as well as local school and educational districts, provided an awareness that giftedness transcended academics and high IQs. The Marland report identified additional areas of giftedness including creativity, the visual and performing arts, and leadership ability. This opened the door to funding for states to develop special education programs designed to meet the needs of students gifted in those areas. Unfortunately, for the last 40-plus years, little has been done to identify and develop leaders under the age of 20. For the last two years, I’ve read practically every article, book, and assessment published within the gifted and talented community (GT) on leadership, in addition to joining its associations (e.g. NAGC, CAG, CEC) and attending their conventions. While I applaud this sector’s inclusion of leadership ability as a domain, I’ve also discovered a blind spot.

Gap #2

The primary gap of young leader development lies between those most invested in youth and those most invested in leadership development. The primary groups who work with children and youth are educators. These include teachers and school administrators, as well as extracurricular members such as coaches, civic group employees, and faith community members. Nearly all of these individuals are professionally trained in fields other than organizational leadership, such as pedagogy, psychology, social work, athletics, religious education and administration. They are intelligent, dedicated, and hard working. Yet very few of them have led entire

organizations themselves, experienced executive training, or studied organizational leadership at concentrated level. Nearly all of the leadership articles written within the gifted and talented field are authored by people without credentials in the field of leadership development.

On the other side of the chasm are leadership specialists, who almost solely focus on adults. While culturally oriented, the primary explanation for this divide seems to be economic in nature. Leadership development of adults is where the money is. When people are old enough to be hired by organizations that need leading, that's when they're most apt to be identified for their leadership aptitude and recruited for training. Research funding, book and article publishing, and speaker/consultant/professor economics gravitate to developing adult leaders. When people in their 20s get jobs, it often takes them 10-20 years to prove themselves worthy of significant investment. Therefore, nearly all serious leadership development resources focus on adults who have, to a certain extent, proven themselves as possessing significant aptitude for leading. While some dabble in college and under-30 leadership training, this approach is usually quite haphazard. From my analysis of leadership develop resources for those under 20, well over 90% of the "leadership" training is little more than team building, self-actualization exercises, and well-intended but willy-nilly activities that are better defined as service, self-esteem, and popularity.

The big gap is that leadership specialists focus on adults, whereby those who work with children and youth are primarily educational experts, leaving a significant void in terms of identifying and developing leaders under 20 years of age. The result is that we miss significant developmental windows that could take advantage of moral pliability and elevated cognitive ability, not to mention the significant head start we could provide with experiential learning and recruitment of mass quantities. Imagine what it would be like if leadership experts joined forces with student specialists, to design community, city, state, and national systems to identify and develop leadership ability talent beginning with children.

The O Factor

In my work the last ten years — interacting with thousands of children and young adults globally, ages 2-22 — I've discovered that organizational leadership aptitude is indeed a gift, based both on genetic wiring and environmental influences. I'm convinced the leaders are both born and made, not either or. In some sub-cultures, 3-5% of students possess 60-80% of the social influence. In others, 10% influence the large majority. A very small percent of any given social group possess the natural ability to influence their peers and learn organizational skills in a concentrated fashion. While we complain about the current quality and quantity of leaders, we do little to identify and develop leaders while they're most pliable. Nearly every species of animal and insect reflects what we know about humans. An incrementally small number of members possess the innate ability to organize the rest, to achieve together what they would not or could not as individuals. Whether it's bees, buffalo, sheep, cattle, ants, or wolves, living entities accomplish together would they would not or could not alone. The obvious difference between humans and the rest is that we possess the ability to intentionally develop members, if we valued organizational leadership at a very early stage.

This ability to organize others toward a common goal is what corporations invest billions of dollars in annually. Those who do it well command huge salaries from the for-

profit corporations they lead. Those who do it ineffectively are ejected from their roles and ostracized from the organizations that embraced them. Worse, unethical yet effective leaders scar society with their gross atrocities. So while most of us in leadership development invest our expertise in adult leaders who've emerged from the pack and who wield their influence politically and corporately, we fail society by focusing solely on adults. Savvy leadership experts should think proactively, developing talent years and even decades earlier than traditional practices.

What I've learned over the last decade is that the younger you focus, the more you need to emphasize organizational leadership giftedness. Most neuroscience research related to leadership characteristics estimate that 30-60% of organizational qualities are genetic in nature. Those who work with students attest to seeing organizational skills emerge as early as two years old, when infants begin socializing. This becomes even more evident in preschool and early elementary ages. Certainly, by the preteen years, we can see how a small minority influence the large majority, to do things they should or should not be doing. Some of the finest leaders find themselves in the principal's office on a weekly basis. Yet scholastic cultures not only overlook, but often thwart the leadership potential within these individuals. Cultures of conformity do not reward non-conformists, which organizational leaders frequently are. So while we lament the lack of effective and ethical leaders in our national elections and international corporations, we are doing little to get ahead of the curve and carve out resources to identify and develop future organizational leaders at an early age.

The time has come for us to begin identifying multitudes of leaders at a very young age and then inviting them into developmental training curricula that would give them a 10-30 year head start from their predecessors. We owe it to society to quit throwing so many resources at a few who are less likely to benefit from them and begin investing our social technology on the multitudes who are apt to benefit the most. The result is that we'll see a logarithmic increase in the most effective and ethical leaders the world has ever witnessed. That is vision underlying my book, *The O Factor*.

References

Bersin, Josh. (October 30, 2014). Executive Confidence Hurt by Lack of Leadership Development. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2014/10/30/new-research-shows-business-leader-confidence-hurt-by-lack-of-development/>

Marland, S. P., Jr. (1972). *Education of the Gifted and Talented: Report to the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Commissioner of Education and Background Papers Submitted to the U.S. Office of Education*, 2 vols. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. (Government Documents Y4.L 11/2: G36)

Van Velsor, Ellen & Wright, Joel. (2015). *Expanding the Leadership Equation: Developing Next-Generation Leaders* (White Paper). Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership. Retrieved from <http://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ExpandingLeadershipEquation.pdf>

Zenger, Jack. (December 17, 2012). We Wait Too Long to Train Our Leaders. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2012/12/why-do-we-wait-so-long-to-trai>

Published January, 2017 in "Intersection" by the International Leadership Association (ILA) <http://intersections.ilamembers.org/member-benefit-access/interface/field-reports/alan-nelson-mind-the-gap>