



What's Your Leadership Origin Story?

by Alyson Meister, Wei Zheng and Brianna Barker Caza

Origin stories come in many forms: tales of how we entered a profession, personal chronicles explaining how and when we became part of an organization, accounts of how we met our significant other, or even how we emerged as a new person after a crisis. Despite this natural inclination, we rarely examine what we include (and don't include) in those accounts and how those choices shape our present reality. To better understand how leaders see themselves, we conducted in-depth interviews with 92 men and women to discover how they tell the story of their leadership origins, and then examined how their telling aligned with their present-day realities.

[Our findings](#) provide insight into how leaders tell their stories, why they matter, and, more specifically, how those stories differ across gender. Below are our key findings, along with questions you can consider when it comes to your own leadership origins, how you can draw on your origins to become a more adaptable leader, and what you can do to cultivate different 'types' of leaders within your organization.

We All Pick a Lens

How would you respond if someone asked when you first felt like a leader? Would you start in childhood, or when you first took on that big position in your organization? Was it when others told you that you were a leader or asked for direction? We found that the 92 origin stories we studied converged around one of four dominant themes, which we labeled: being, engaging, performing, and accepting. These themes acted as lenses, determining how the leaders we interviewed see themselves today. As you read through them, consider which one sounds the most familiar to you, and think about how this narrative might shape your leadership today.

Being

The leaders who adopted this lens suggested that they have "always thought of themselves as leaders." For example, Juan told us: "I've been a leader since I was a child. I've always enjoyed leading teams, leading people." They highlighted a natural call to leadership that started in childhood or early school years, perhaps organizing kids in the neighborhood, engaging in entrepreneurial activities, or becoming captains of

sports teams. In describing their *current* leadership, people who use this lens often noted their personal qualities, such as confidence and optimism, and their natural — and inspirational — leadership styles.

Engaging

Leaders who used this lens highlighted the successful facilitation of others and activities. They believed their leadership originated when they were compelled to address an urgent need. For example, Jennifer linked her origins to activities: “It’s not like I came out of the chute trying to be the natural-born leader,” she told us. “But I do like the idea of creating a vision, looking at what needs to get done, making something better than it is now.” The leaders who used this lens took it upon themselves to change unsatisfactory practices: starting a new organization, helping disparate groups come to a shared vision, volunteering to tackle a challenge or crisis situation, liaising between two groups in conflict. In the present day, these leaders gravitate toward a more facilitative leadership style, focusing on engaging others and enabling collective action.

Performing

Do you feel a sense of duty to the organization? Or perhaps you often feel protective of your team, which you might sometimes refer to as “my people”? Leaders who adopted this lens often recounted their leadership as emerging from the achievement of a particular position. For example, Randy said: “I never really thought about [being a leader] until I worked for the agency in Chicago. I was actually running ... [an organization with] 50 full-time people, in 50 offices, [who] all needed me. And that’s when it clicked in that, ‘Wow, I have a big position and I’m responsible for a lot of people.’” People talked about having a sense of autonomy and control over an area of work, as well as a strong sense of duty and responsibility for their teams. This group tended to describe themselves as having paternalistic leadership styles, marked by a demonstration of control, support, and guidance of their team.

Accepting

Those who used this lens didn’t think of themselves as leaders until they realized that others were *following* them. They recalled suddenly noticing that people were coming to them for answers, guidance, and support. Tyler recounted: “It wasn’t that I said I wanted to be a leader. But I think it was classmates at that time that saw [my] leadership qualities, which meant treating others equally [and] with respect and being able to make a good fair and strong decision. So I’d say when I look back on it, I was recognized by others as a leader before I even knew what leadership was.” As Tyler’s quote suggests, this group tended toward supporting or serving the needs others above themselves, often with a low-key demeanor.

How did you become the leader you are today? Which of the above lenses do you most naturally gravitate toward? Reflect on how the stories you tell may link to how you lead others, and *who* you recognize as leading or showing potential for leadership. This is not just an activity to classify your past. The lens through which you view your early

leadership experiences impacts how you behave — in both positive and negative ways.

Your Leadership Lens Both Enables and Constrains Your Leadership

In our study we discovered there is a strong and reciprocal link between the stories people tell about “becoming” leaders and their current leadership. This means that rigidly using only one lens could limit your ability to experiment with different styles over time. For example, if you only see yourself as a leader when and if others are following you (*accepting*), your identity may be highly tied to the perceptions of others, which could hold you back from claiming a new leader role unless you’re “asked” to by others. Sticking to one lens may also constrain who you see as leaders, limiting who you seek out as role models and who you tap to take on leadership roles. For example, if you “have always been a leader” (*being*), it may be difficult to let someone else, especially someone with a different style, assume a leadership role in a team of your peers.

What does this mean for you?

Experiment with different origin stories that draw on different past experiences and memories of your leadership. Consider when you saw yourself stepping up during adversity to help others take action, or consider when others looked to you for support, advice, or guidance. What if you were *born* a leader? What would this mean for your leadership? Practice constructing and telling different types of leadership stories, which can strengthen your identity and increase your adaptability.

This is important to do for people you manage or mentor as well. Ask them to tell the story of how they “became” a leader, and share yours. This will expand your shared understanding of what leadership is and may trigger opportunities for them to experiment with different behaviors.

Gender Differences

While we found no difference across industries, ages, seniority level, or functions when it came to which lens our respondents used, we did find that gender played a role. Similar numbers of men and women relied on the *being* lens (I was *always* a leader) and the *accepting* theme (I’m a leader if and when *others* see me as one). However, more women felt like leaders when they were actively “doing” what they consider to be leadership activities (the *engaging* lens). More men, on the other hand, relied on the *performing* lens, meaning that they believed they became leaders when they achieved a particular role, and felt like leaders when taking care of their teams and performing the duties and responsibilities assigned to that role.

Women’s gravitation toward the *engaging* lens may help explain why research shows that women may be asked to — and tend to take on — more non-critical tasks at work,

or step up to take actions in times of crisis. The *engaging* lens allows them to take an active role to better the situation, in the absence of positions that may be harder for women to attain than for men. At the same time, this particular lens may also place an extra burden on women to continue taking on tasks, to sustain this sense of being a leader by “doing.” Such gender differences are subtle but can have significant implications for how both women and men conceptualize and take on leadership. Being aware of these gendered tendencies can help us “try out” new lenses, and to uncover potential blind spots that could limit advancement.

What does this mean for you?

Be mindful that men and women may gravitate toward different lenses when it comes to reflecting on their leadership. To help them develop their identity, allow them to experiment with multiple narratives and select one that feels comfortable. That's an important step. You can also help them notice the possible constraints of one narrative and enrich their stories with multiple narratives.

How you remember and explain your path to leadership matters. It can shape your style as a leader and unknowingly bind you to certain beliefs about what a leader does. By getting to know your story, and experimenting with different ways of telling it, you can become more adaptive, and ultimately, a better leader.

[Alyson Meister](#) is professor of leadership and organizational behavior at IMD Business School in Lausanne, Switzerland. Specializing in the development of globally-oriented, adaptive and inclusive organizations, she works with executives, teams, and organizations spanning a vast range of industry sectors, from professional services through to industrial goods and technology. Her research focuses on identity and diversity, leadership, and team dynamics in organizations.

[Wei Zheng](#) is an associate professor of management and Richard R. Roscitt Endowed Chair in Leadership at Stevens Institute of Technology. Her research addresses practical questions at the intersection of leadership and diversity, such as how individuals grow into leaders, how leaders influence learning and innovation, how women leaders navigate gendered organizations, and what practices and mechanisms enhance diversity. She has studied leadership in corporate, entrepreneurial, national laboratory, and faith-based organizations.

[Brianna Barker Caza](#) is an Associate Professor of Management in the Bryan School of Business and Economics at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She received her PhD in Organizational Psychology from the University of Michigan. Her research

examines identity processes, interpersonal relationships, power dynamics, and resilience at work. Brianna was recently recognized as one of the 2019 Radar thinkers by Thinkers50.

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