"Some people are just naturals."

The most expensive sentence in tech.

Engineers are trained to respect raw talent. So when they watch the confident presenter, the colleague who knows everyone, or the manager people would follow anywhere, many quietly conclude: *that's not me, and it never will be.* The research disagrees. Leadership, confidence, charisma, communication and management behave like skills: they respond to practice, feedback and repetition. Here is the evidence, the cases, and a way to start this week, before your MBA starts or before it ends.

What the evidence says

1. **Training changes how leaders act at work.** ●●●
   A meta-analysis of 335 samples (about 26,600 people) found training reliably improved on-the-job leadership behaviour, a large effect (corrected δ ≈ 0.8). Programmes worked best when they added practice and feedback and spread sessions out over time.[1]

2. **Charisma is partly a set of learnable techniques.** ●●○
   Managers trained in 12 specific tactics (stories, metaphors, contrasts, three-part lists, rhetorical questions, stated conviction, high goals with confidence they can be met, an animated voice and gestures) were rated noticeably more charismatic by their own colleagues months later (d ≈ 0.6).[2]

3. **Personality moves.** ●●●
   Across 207 intervention studies, traits (especially emotional stability, then extraversion) shifted by about a third of a standard deviation in roughly six months, and the change lasted. The studies were mostly clinical.[3] Students who simply *set out* to become more extraverted changed measurably over 16 weeks, most clearly when they turned the goal into concrete if-then plans.[4]

4. **You don't have to become an extravert.** ●●○
   Extraverted leadership helped passive teams but *hurt* proactive ones, apparently because quieter leaders listened more. Match your style to your team.[5]

THE HONEST PART

Twin studies estimate that about **30%** of the differences in who ends up leading is genetic.[6] Starting points differ. But that leaves about 70% to experience, choices and practice. You can't choose your starting line. You can choose how far you go.

Why the myth survives

- **You see the performance, not the rehearsal.** The "natural" speaker ran the talk fifteen times; the connector sent follow-ups you never saw.
- **We're biased towards naturals.** ●●○ In three experiments people *said* effort matters more than talent, then preferred the "natural" over an equally accomplished "striver", and experts did so *more* strongly than novices.[7] When you think "I'm not a natural", that may be the bias talking, not the evidence.
- **Deep tech rewards being right on your own.** Leading is getting to right *through other people*, a different skill. Your first attempts will feel clumsy; that is what learning feels like.

CASE · ANDY GROVE, INTEL

A chemical-engineering PhD with no business degree, Grove taught himself management so seriously that he wrote it up as an engineering system. *High Output Management* (1983) defines a manager's output as "the output of his organization plus the output of the neighboring organizations under his influence".[8] **Studying a system until you understand it works on teams too.**

Try this week

1. **Baseline.** Rate yourself 1–10 on leading, managing, starting conversations, presence, confidence and communicating. Circle the one that would matter most if it rose two points.
2. **Interview a "natural".** Ask someone who seems born with it: *"How did you learn to do that?"* Most will describe practice you never saw.
3. **One rep in 48 hours.** The smallest real action for your circled skill: one question in a meeting, one introduction, one line of feedback. Tell someone you'll do it.

Sources. [1] Lacerenza, Reyes, Marlow, Joseph & Salas (2017), *J. Applied Psychology* 102(12), 1686–1718. [2] Antonakis, Fenley & Liechti (2011), *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 10(3), 374–396. [3] Roberts et al. (2017), *Psychological Bulletin* 143(2), 117–141. [4] Hudson & Fraley (2015), *J. Personality & Social Psychology* 109(3), 490–507. [5] Grant, Gino & Hofmann (2011), *Academy of Management Journal* 54(3), 528–550. [6] Arvey et al. (2006), *Leadership Quarterly* 17(1), 1–20. [7] Tsay & Banaji (2011), *J. Experimental Social Psychology* 47(2), 460–465. [8] Grove (1983), *High Output Management*; Tedlow (2006), *Andy Grove*; Stanford GSB, *Strategic Dynamics*.

Evidence: ●●● strong (meta-analysis, replicated) · ●●○ solid (peer-reviewed studies) · ●○○ practitioner wisdom

Confidence is a result, not a requirement.

It's built in reps, the way elite teams build it.

Most people wait to feel confident before they act. It runs the other way: small real actions produce confidence. That's good news, because actions are under your control and feelings aren't.

The engine: small, real wins

1. **Confidence has four sources, and doing is the strongest.** ●●●

   Psychologist Albert Bandura identified four sources of confidence in a specific task: **doing it** (mastery), **watching someone like you do it**, **being credibly told you can**, and **reading your own nerves** as readiness rather than danger. Mastery is the most powerful.[1] Across 114 studies, task confidence tracked work performance ($r \approx .38$), partly because doing well builds confidence. It's a loop you can enter from either side.[2]

2. **Exposure shrinks fear; avoidance feeds it.** ●●●

   For clinical social anxiety, the best-supported treatment across 101 trials is CBT built around gradual exposure.[3] Stress-inoculation training, which means rehearsing under steadily rising pressure, reliably reduces anxiety and improves performance under stress.[4] So climb a ladder of fears one rung at a time, staying on each until it feels ordinary.

If fear of social situations is stopping you from living your life, that's a job for a professional, not a field guide. Therapy for it works well.

CASE · HOW US ARMY SPECIAL FORCES BUILD CAPABILITY IN OTHERS

Special Forces' core job is making *other people* capable: training and advising partner forces "by, with and through" them. Their units are 12-person teams with every member cross-trained, and their qualification course ends in **Robin Sage**, a weeks-long exercise in which student teams must build rapport with, train and advise a role-played guerrilla force.[5] The pattern is the one this guide uses:

- **Small teams**, not lone heroes.
- **Graduated missions**: skills in pieces, then the full exercise.
- **A debrief after everything.**
- **Success is measured by the people you trained.**

Steal the debrief

The Army's after-action review is a short, rank-free conversation after any event, built on four questions:[6]

1. What was supposed to happen?
2. What actually happened?
3. Why was there a difference?
4. What will we keep, and what will we change next time?

Ten minutes, written down, after every rep. It turns embarrassment into data.

CASE · SPACEX FALCON 1

Falcon 1 failed three times (2006, 2007, 2008): a corroded nut, propellant slosh, a stage collision. Each time the team found the root cause, fixed it, and flew again. In September 2008 the fourth flight became the first privately developed liquid-fuelled rocket to reach orbit.[7] **Make failures small enough to survive, and debrief every one.**

FIVE THINGS YOU CAN STOP BELIEVING

- **Power posing** changes your hormones: failed to replicate.[8]
- **"10,000 hours":** practice matters, but there's no magic threshold.[8]
- **Learning styles:** matching them shows no benefit in tests.[8]
- **Your MBTI type:** often changes on retest. Not a destiny.[8]
- **Mindset alone:** small effects. Practice is the lever.[8]

Try this week

1. **Build your ladder.** For your circled skill, list ten rungs from "mildly awkward" to "terrifying".
2. **Recruit a team of three.** Twenty minutes a week; each person names one rung to climb.
3. **Climb one rung** and debrief it with the four questions.

Sources. [1] Bandura (1977), *Psychological Review* 84(2), 191–215. [2] Stajkovic & Luthans (1998), *Psychological Bulletin* 124(2), 240–261. [3] Mayo-Wilson et al. (2014), *Lancet Psychiatry* 1(5), 368–376. [4] Saunders, Driskell, Johnston & Salas (1996), *J. Occupational Health Psychology* 1(2), 170–186. [5] US Army Special Forces doctrine and Robin Sage coverage (DVIDS). [6] US Army TC 25-20 (1993), *A Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews*; the four-question form is the common teaching version. [7] SpaceX flight reports and contemporary press, 2006–2008. [8] Ranehill et al. (2015), *Psychological Science*; Macnamara, Hambrick & Oswald (2014), *Psychological Science*; Pashler et al. (2008), *Psych. Science in the Public Interest*; Pittenger (2005), *Consulting Psychology Journal*; Sisk et al. (2018), *Psychological Science*.

Evidence: ●●● strong · ●●○ solid · ●○○ practitioner wisdom

Presence is a set of behaviours.
You can rehearse every one of them.

"Charisma" sounds like magic, and magic can't be learned. But when researchers break it down, it turns out to be specific things people say and do, and each of them can be practised in private before you use it in public.

Charisma, unpacked ●●○

The 12 techniques from the charisma-training studies (managers trained in them were rated more charismatic by colleagues months later):[1]

Connect	Stories and anecdotes · metaphors and analogies · reflecting how the group feels
Clarify	Contrasts ("not X, but Y") · three-part lists · rhetorical questions
Commit	Stated moral conviction · high goals · confidence the goals can be met
Carry	Animated voice · facial expression · gesture

Two warnings. Clumsy overuse reads as parody, so add one or two at a time. And these techniques persuade whether or not you're right, so they belong only in the service of the truth. Page 4 shows what happens otherwise.

Extraversion is a behaviour you can schedule

●●○ Acting more outgoing reliably lifts mood in the moment, even for introverts. But a week-long randomised trial found introverts asked to *keep it up* felt more tired and less authentic.[2] So don't attempt a personality transplant. Plan **extraversion sprints** (the event, the all-hands, the first week with a new team) and book recovery time afterwards, as an athlete would.

CASE · MEI'S FIRST ALL-HANDS (COMPOSITE)

Mei, a backend engineer of fifteen years, was asked to present her team's plan to 200 people. She wrote it in her usual style: accurate, complete, flat. Her team of three helped her rebuild it around one story (the 3 a.m. outage that started the project), one contrast ("we're not adding features; we're removing a failure mode") and a three-part plan. She rehearsed six times, twice on video, and ran a debrief afterwards. Three people asked to join the project. **Nothing about her personality changed. Her preparation did.**

The underrated half: asking

●●○ In live conversations, people told to ask more questions were liked more by the person they were talking to, and **follow-up questions** did most of the work, because they show you were actually listening. People don't expect this.[3] Useful follow-ups:

- "What made you choose that?"
- "What was the hardest part?"
- "What would you do differently now?"

For introverts this is the best news on the page: **the skill that makes you likeable is listening.** You already have the raw material.

Starting conversations

●○○ **The 30-second intro:** who you are, what you're working on, and what you're curious about, ending in a question back to them. **The informational conversation:** twenty minutes, asking about *their* path. Before you leave, ask two things: *"Who else should I talk to?"* and *"Is there anything I can help you with?"* The second signals you're there to relate, not to extract. Sometimes the answer is yes, and that's where real professional relationships start.

Try this week

1. **Rewrite your next update** with one story, one contrast and one three-part list. Rehearse it aloud twice.
2. **Two follow-ups first.** In three conversations, ask two follow-up questions before saying anything about yourself.
3. **One sprint, one recovery.** Start three conversations at an event, then block an hour alone afterwards.

Sources. [1] Antonakis, Fenley & Liechti (2011), *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 10(3), 374–396. [2] Fleeson, Malanos & Achille (2002), *J. Personality & Social Psychology* 83(6), 1409–1422; Jacques-Hamilton, Sun & Smillie (2019), *J. Experimental Psychology: General*. [3] Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson & Gino (2017), *J. Personality & Social Psychology* 113(3), 430–452. Starting-conversation methods: practitioner guidance from career and networking field work.

Evidence: ●●● strong · ●●○ solid · ●○○ practitioner wisdom · Composite cases combine several real patterns and are labelled.

Your output is now other people's output.
The hardest switch an expert ever makes.

You were promoted for being right yourself. Management pays for something else: getting a team of people who may know more than you to be right together, and to tell you the truth when they aren't.

What new managers get wrong

●●○ In a year-long study of first-time managers, Linda Hill found most began believing the job was about **authority and control**, and learned the hard way that it runs on **interdependence, credibility and earned commitment**.[1] Andy Grove's fix was leverage: spend your time where it multiplies others' output, above all in regular **one-on-ones set by the report's agenda**, where you mostly listen.[2] When Google studied its own managers, "is a good coach" ranked first among the behaviours of its best managers and technical skill came *last*. That was an internal study, not peer-reviewed, but telling.[3]

Leading people who know more than you

●●● Your job shifts from having the answers to drawing them out. Across 136 samples, teams where people feel safe to speak up share more information, learn more and perform somewhat better (mostly correlational evidence).[4] ●●○ Leaders who admit mistakes, credit others and visibly keep learning tend to spread those habits through their teams.[5] At Pixar, the "Braintrust" of senior filmmakers gives brutally candid notes, but has **no authority**: the director decides. Taking away the power to command is what makes the honesty safe.[6]

Candour with care

●●● Across 607 feedback effects, feedback helped on average, but in more than a third of cases it made performance *worse*, especially when it pointed at the person rather than the task.[7] Be specific, prompt and private, and talk about the work, not the worker, because you want them to win.

Try this week

1. **One-on-one on their agenda.** Hold one (or ask your manager for one) and ask: *"What's one thing I could do differently that would help you?"*
2. **Quietest expert first.** In your next technical discussion, ask the quietest expert's view before giving yours.
3. **One piece of feedback** about the work, not the person: specific, within a day, in private.

CASE · CHALLENGER (1986) AND APOLLO 13 (1970)

Challenger. The night before launch, Thiokol's engineers recommended against flying in record cold because of their O-ring concerns. Under pressure, a manager was told to "take off your engineering hat", the recommendation was reversed, and NASA's top decision-makers never heard the objection. Sociologist Diane Vaughan showed that the danger had already become **normal**: earlier erosion had been accepted flight after flight. The Columbia board said much the same seventeen years later.[8]

Apollo 13. When an oxygen tank exploded, Flight Director Gene Kranz split his team into problem-owning groups and let the people closest to each system invent the fixes. "Failure is not an option" was never said there; it was written for the 1995 film.[9] **Same agency, opposite outcomes: one culture filtered out the truth; the other went looking for it.**

DEEP-TECH RED FLAGS

- "We've flown with it before." Past luck has quietly become the evidence.
- Bad news gets softer at every level it climbs.
- The dissenter has to prove it's *unsafe*, rather than the plan proving it's *safe*.
- Information is withheld from the people who need it. A congressional report blamed the 737 MAX crashes, which killed 346 people, partly on a "culture of concealment".[10] At Theranos, scientists who flagged failing tests met legal threats.[11]

Sources. [1] Hill (1992/2003), *Becoming a Manager*, HBS Press; Hill (2007), "Becoming the Boss", *HBR* 85(1). [2] Grove (1983), *High Output Management*. [3] Google re:Work, Project Oxygen (internal). [4] Edmondson (1999), *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(2), 350–383; Frazier et al. (2017), *Personnel Psychology* 70(1), 113–165. [5] Owens & Hekman (2012), *Academy of Management Journal* 55(4), 787–818; (2016), *AMJ*. [6] Catmull (2014), *Creativity, Inc.* [7] Kluger & DeNisi (1996), *Psychological Bulletin* 119(2), 254–284. [8] Rogers Commission (1986); Vaughan (1996), *The Challenger Launch Decision*; Columbia Accident Investigation Board (2003). [9] Kranz (2000), *Failure Is Not an Option*; NASA JSC oral histories. [10] US House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure (2020), final report on the 737 MAX. [11] Carreyrou (2018), *Bad Blood*.

Evidence: ●●● strong · ●●○ solid · ●○○ practitioner wisdom

Don’t wait for the title.

People are recognised as leaders for what they already do.

You don’t become a leader on the day someone appoints you. You try on the role in small ways, others respond, and the identity grows from both sides. The MBA is a two-year laboratory for exactly this, if you start running experiments now.

Leadership is claimed and granted

●●○ Leadership scholars describe leader identity as something you **claim** through behaviour and others **grant** through their response.[1] New professionals “try on” provisional versions of themselves, borrowed from people they admire, until one fits.[2] So copy someone shamelessly, debrief it, and keep what works.

Your network is architecture, not a list

●●○ In a classic study, most people who found a job through a contact heard about it from someone they saw only **occasionally or rarely**, not from a close friend. Acquaintances carry new information.[3] Managers whose networks bridged separate groups had ideas that were more often voiced, valued and rewarded.[4] **Be the bridge:** the engineer who talks to sales, the scientist who knows the investors.

●○○ **At conferences,** the value sits in the unscheduled time and in meetings you booked in advance. Follow up within 72 hours, or the contact fades.

Your first 90 days in any seat

●○○ Have five explicit conversations with your new manager: the **situation** as they see it, their **expectations**, the **resources** you have, how you’ll **work together**, and your **development**.[5] Most new leaders guess at all five.

CASE · BELL LABS UNDER MERVIN KELLY

Kelly believed experts do their best work in a deliberately mixed, physically close community. He put theorists beside experimentalists and engineers, and connected the buildings so departments couldn’t wall themselves off. That environment produced the transistor in 1947 and a Nobel Prize in 1956.[6] **The highest form of leading experts is designing the place where they meet.**

The one thing to do today

Send this page to two people and ask them to do the 14 days with you. The team is the method: you become a leader by bringing others along.

A 14-day starter

WEEK 1 · LEAD YOURSELF

1	Rate yourself; circle one	2	Write what you stand for
3	Build your fear ladder	4	30-second intro, three times
5	Ask only follow-ups	6	Film a 2-minute talk
7	Rest; debrief the week	8	Ask a “natural” how

WEEK 2 · LEAD OTHERS

9	A one-on-one, their agenda	10	Ask the quietest expert first
11	Raise one hard truth	12	Introduce two people
13	Teach someone one thing	14	Re-rate; write a 90-day plan

Then keep going for 90 days

●●○ In the best-known real-world study, simple daily habits took a median of about **66 days** to feel automatic, ranging from under three weeks to well over half a year, and **a missed day didn’t reset the clock**.[7] Two weeks starts the habit; ninety days makes it yours. Keep the weekly team debrief going.

TWO YEARS FROM NOW

Picture the person you circled on day one, two points higher on every skill: someone who walks into a room of strangers with a plan, says the hard thing kindly, asks the question nobody else asked, and whose team is better because they’re on it. None of that requires a different personality. It requires reps, a debrief and a few people walking with you.

Sources. [1] DeRue & Ashford (2010), *Academy of Management Review* 35(4), 627–647. [2] Ibarra (1999), *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(4), 764–791. [3] Granovetter (1973), *American Journal of Sociology* 78(6), 1360–1380. [4] Burt (2004), *American Journal of Sociology* 110(2), 349–399. [5] Watkins (2003, updated 2013), *The First 90 Days*, HBR Press. [6] Gertner (2012), *The Idea Factory*. [7] Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts & Wardle (2010), *European J. Social Psychology* 40(6), 998–1009. Conference practice: practitioner guidance.

Evidence: ●●● strong · ●●○ solid · ●○○ practitioner wisdom. Free to share.