“Leaders are responsible for learning.”
That’s the challenge put out by Peter Senge, who popularized the notion of the learning organization.

How can we most effectively help people – including ourselves – learn about leadership?

There are at least three key areas of learning for effective and meaningful leadership development at both the personal and organizational levels:

First, leaders must be committed to learning about themselves.

Second, leaders must be committed to learning about others.

Third, leaders must be committed to learning about the task of leadership.

Learning about self

“Management of self is critical: without it, leaders and managers can do more harm than good,” wrote Warren Bennis in Why Leaders Can’t Lead. “Like incompetent doctors, incompetent managers can make life worse.”

Self-awareness is at the heart of what we often refer to as emotional intelligence. Understanding our strengths and weaknesses and being aware of our emotional and intellectual responses to the often highly-charged situations we encounter every day are vital first steps to managing our behaviour, decision making and influencing strategies. Learning about ourselves can help us play to our strengths more effectively and be more open to support in weaker areas. It can also increase our self-confidence.

“How to” ideas ...

- Reflect on your experience of what works easily for you, what challenges you and how
you tend to respond to those challenges, what's rewarding and what brings your best results.

- Take a reputable self-awareness instrument (e.g., like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, TMS Team Management Profile or Human Synergistics Life Styles Inventory) and carefully debrief the results with a skilled coach.
- Ask for some 360-degree feedback from trusted colleagues about one or two things they see as your key strengths and key areas for improvement.

**Learning about others**

"Endeavours succeed or fail because of the people involved," said General Colin Powell, former US Secretary of State. "Only by attracting the best people will you accomplish great deeds."

According to a group interperson skill program like those identified above, either with colleagues or in a public program such as a reading program including books like People Skills by Robert Bolton and Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman, creativity, and planning.

The task of learning about leadership is a daily one for anyone committed to the process. It's also a daily responsibility for those in leadership roles to provide ongoing learning opportunities, from formal and informal mentoring to practical "stretch" opportunities and ongoing feedback and encouragement, and formal developmental programs.

"How to" ideas...

- Enroll in a tertiary management program or an executive development course
- Get a mentor and meet regularly so you can pick their brains
- One of the best ways to improve your learning and apply it to deplab learning experiences with a mentor or colleague.

"Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes; but no plans," said the late Peter Drucker.

Attracting the best people and retaining them engaging their best efforts requires a commitment to understanding them and identifying the best ways to respond to and influence them. It's no easy task but, as Colin Powell says, if people are at the core of our success or failure then we must be committed to developing our "people skills."

One of the immediate benefits of increased self-awareness is that we quickly become aware that other people aren't necessarily the same as us and that that's okay! In fact, it can be very useful to have people around us who see and process things differently. "Social awareness" means we are able to empathize with others' situations, see our own responses in the larger organizational context, and understand how best to contribute within a group, team or community context.

The ability to understand, relate to and positively influence others is crucial to the contemporary leader's success. "People don't leave organizations, they leave their bosses" is an axiom that's all too true — and it highlights the fact that work is about relationships.

"People skills" are essentially relationship skills. So, work is very much about how we relate to other people as we try to get things done.

**Learning about the task of leadership**

Being self-aware and having a good understanding of the people you're working with makes you a great leader (although those two skills will arguably help you more than an MBA). There are skills that leaders can only develop through experience, from the examples of others, and through education. Most leadership development programs will have a strong people-focus component — reinforcing self- and other-awareness — but will add dimensions such as communication, performance management, coaching.

**Committed to learning**

"Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes; but no plans," said the late Peter Drucker.

It's exciting to observe how people who are committed to learning how to be more effective leaders engage so actively and personally with learning opportunities — indeed, how they create such opportunities.

For the past year I've been privileged to work with an organization-wide leadership development program in Asia. The (mostly young) participants are not only engaged in "active learning" as they apply knowledge to their workplace situations, they are also very active learners as they observe senior leaders in their organization.

Recently, the company chairman visited one of the sites. The immediate aftermath of his visit provided a fascinating learning environment. Every workshop group spontaneously discussed what they had observed about the chairman's style, communication, and manner. After a while they began to discuss the impact of his visit had had on the centre — how his style, communication and manner had influenced that part of the team. They discussed other organizational leaders and they volunteered some of the behaviors they wanted to emulate. As a result, they realized there was much more they wanted to learn about how to lead — not simply to be like a leader they'd seen, but to become the leaders they could be.

Their commitment to learning was that moment was tangible. Knowledge and even opportunity are of little value if the individual isn't committed to learning and development. And that's the key: commitment. We can teach leadership, but learning about it requires commitment — and that commitment goes beyond the individual.

Organizations, departments, and teams need shared commitment to developing not just individual leaders for specific roles at specific times, but leadership capacity throughout teams, departments, and organizations. The commitment to personal and organizational leadership capacity is a natural part of any organization's ongoing commitment to "the pursuit of excellence". As Warren Bennis said, "Leaders value learning and mastery, and so do people who work for leaders."