

Why B Students Make the Best Leaders

It's a balance of brains and people skills.

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We live in a world where nearly every parent encourages their children to get good grades in school. Not only that, there might even be the expectation that their child get *all* A's--a perfect 4.0 grade point average--for their entire academic life. Anything less would be considered a disappointment (you know who you are, parents).

The belief, of course, is that unless a child performs well in school, they won't experience the same success in life as those children who get all A's.

Don't get me wrong: I am all for kids excelling in school. I've even encouraged my own kids to earn more A's on their report cards. But let's be clear: The ability to get A's in school demonstrates a highly refined ability to get A's in school and not success in business or leadership.

But, as a B student in college myself, there's a dirty little secret that a lot of parents, teachers, and students might want to know: [A students don't grow up to lead companies](#). Matter of fact, they rarely go on to lead anything. It's the B students who actually make the best leaders.

Consider the study that West Point conducted on its graduates to see how their grades correlated with the kind of military career they enjoyed.

What the school found was that when it came to its graduates who eventually became general officers in the U.S. Army--people who lead thousands of people and manage budgets in the billions of dollars--a disproportionately high number of them were B students.

The point is that leading organizations rarely has anything to do with pure intellect alone. While A students can make great individual contributors, maybe as scientists, engineers, or professors, they may not have developed the same interpersonal skills that B students have.

When I was studying engineering as an undergrad, for example, I was never the smartest person in any of my classes. But, unlike my genius classmates who went on to much more distinguished academic careers, I learned what it took to lead and inspire people instead.

We all have friends who are super smart--but who almost might be too smart, which can make them hard to relate to. B students, however, have learned to flourish by using a combination of good-enough mental horsepower with a kind of emotional intelligence that gives them the ability [to relate to and motivate people](#).

Not to overlook C students, but they tend to be wild cards. I remember a joke someone told me about a wealthy philanthropist who visits his alma mater. As he talks to a dean at the school, he shares this advice: Take care of your A students, because they'll become your professors. Also, take care of your B students, because they'll become your steady alumni donors. But really take

care of your C students, because they're the ones who will most likely build a new library in their name because they're the entrepreneurial mavericks who will go on to start successful companies. The [record \\$31 million donation to the University of Maryland](#) by Oculus VR co-founder and UMD dropout Brendan Iribe demonstrates this nicely.

The point is that in today's education system, which treats learning like a post-industrial-age production line, it can be easy to fall prey to the idea that your child or student needs to get perfect report cards to find a successful career.

The truth is that there are skills that are far more important to success than grades, such as, as I've written before, [learning to work and play well with others](#).

So when a student brings home a B on his or her report card, don't freak out. You might even consider celebrating the fact that you might have a future leader on your hands. And, kids, this article doesn't get you out of doing your homework. So get back to work!

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