

Title: The Great Leader Debate

Timing: Up to a month for preparation, up to 1 hour for debate itself

Develops: Research, Reasoning, Communication / Presentation Skills, Influencing Others, Teaming, Group Process

Debate is truly a “thinking sport,” which our primary school system has abandoned. There is an Association for Global Debate which hopes to revive this important technique. Its aim is to spread the value of debate because “debate promotes tolerance, self-expression, innovation, critical thinking, sportsmanship and academic excellence.”

The topic you choose to assign for this activity is immaterial. You can choose any two topics that mutually influence an outcome. This particular topic, The Great Leader Debate, is timeless. It involves a company that everyone is familiar with and often the learners are familiar with the leader’s reputations as well.

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Divide your training group in to two: Leadership and Market Forces

The debate: General Electric has been in business for over 125 years. It has seen many ups and downs - surviving the Great Depression, the dot-com crash and the 2008 financial meltdown.

For many decades the corporation was held in high regard – its business and human resource practices were written about in books, academic journals and general publications. In November of 2008 its stock crashed; the company had lost \$100 billion (US) dollars in market value in just one year. At the same time the rest of the US economy and the stock market were surging.

Between 1981 and 2001 the company was led by Jack Welch who was seen by many as a leadership guru (in 1999 *Fortune Magazine* named him “Manager of the Century”). From 2001 to 2009 the company was led by Jeff Immelt. In the summer of 2009 John Flannery took the helm.

Leadership Team: Research and present an argument for the idea that leadership was directly responsible for GE’s highs and lows.

Market Forces Team: Research and present the argument that leadership is a nominal influence on a company’s success and that market forces are responsible for GE’s highs and lows.

Judging: While there are official rules for judging a debate, “winning” is not the point of this activity. The point is for your learners to research and analyze two important aspects of business success: leadership skill and market forces. After researching, formulating and presenting their position, both groups will have a greater understanding how these two are related – or not.

BONUS: You may want to take the learning one step further and ask each group to write a brief summary of the other group’s position / argument as well as listing three to five things in the opposing team’s argument that made them pause and reconsider their own position.