

LEADERSHIP LESSONS – COLIN POWELL

1. "Being responsible sometimes means pissing people off."

Good leadership involves responsibility to the welfare of the group, which means that some people will get angry at your actions and decisions. It's inevitable, if you're honourable. Trying to get everyone to like you is a sign of mediocrity: you'll avoid the tough decisions, you'll avoid confronting the people who need to be confronted, and you'll avoid offering differential rewards based on differential performance because some people might get upset. Ironically, by procrastinating on the difficult choices, by trying not to get anyone mad, and by treating everyone equally "nicely" regardless of their contributions, you'll simply ensure that the only people you'll wind up angering are the most creative and productive people in the organisation.

2. "The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership."

If this were a litmus test, the majority of CEOs would fail. One, they build so many barriers to upward communication that the very idea of someone lower in the hierarchy looking up to the leader for help is ludicrous. Two, the corporate culture they foster often defines asking for help as weakness or failure, so people cover up their gaps, and the organisation suffers accordingly. Real leaders make themselves accessible and available. They show concern for the efforts and challenges faced by their direct reports, even as they demand high standards. Accordingly, they are more likely to create an environment where problem analysis replaces blame.

3. "Don't be buffaloeed by experts and elites. Experts often possess more data than judgment. Elites can become so inbred that they produce hemophiliacs who bleed to death as soon as they are nicked by the real world."

Small companies and start-ups don't have the time for analytically detached experts. They don't have the money to subsidise lofty elites, either. The president answers the phone and drives the truck when necessary; everyone on the payroll visibly produces and contributes to bottom-line results or they're history. But as companies get bigger, they often forget who "brought them to the dance": things like hands-on involvement, egalitarianism, informality, market intimacy, daring, risk, speed, agility. Policies that emanate from ivory towers often have an adverse impact on the people out in the field who are fighting the wars or bringing in the revenues. Real leaders are vigilant, and combative, in the face of these trends.

4. "Don't be afraid to challenge the pros, even in their own backyard."

Learn from the pros, observe them, seek them out as mentors and partners. But remember that even the pros may have leveled out in terms of their learning and skills. Sometimes even the pros can become complacent and lazy. Leadership does not emerge from blind obedience to anyone. Someone once warned that if you have a 'yes-man' working for you, one of you is redundant. Good leadership encourages everyone's evolution.

5. "Never neglect details. When everyone's mind is dulled or distracted the leader must be doubly vigilant."

Strategy equals execution. All the great ideas and visions in the world are worthless if they can't be implemented rapidly and efficiently. Good leaders delegate and empower others liberally, but they pay attention to details, every day. Bad ones, even those who see themselves as progressive "visionaries," think they're somehow "above" operational details. Paradoxically, good leaders understand something else: an obsessive routine in carrying out the details generates conformity and complacency, which in turn dulls everyone's mind. That is why even as they pay attention to details, they continually encourage people to challenge the process. Prominent leaders have asserted that the job of a leader is not to be the chief organiser, but the chief disorganiser.

6. "You don't know what you can get away with until you try."

You know the expression, "it's easier to get forgiveness than permission." Well, it's true. Good leaders don't wait for official blessing to try things out. They're prudent, not reckless. But they also realise a fact of life in most organisations: if you ask enough people for permission, you'll inevitably come up against someone who believes their job is to say "no." So the moral is, don't ask. Less effective middle managers endorsed the sentiment, "If I haven't explicitly been told 'yes', I can't do it," whereas the good ones believed, "If I haven't explicitly been told 'no,' I can." There's a world of difference between these two points of view.

7. "Keep looking below surface appearances. Don't shrink from doing so (just) because you might not like what you find."

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it" is the slogan of the complacent, the arrogant or the scared. It's an excuse for inaction. It's a mind-set that assumes (or hopes) that today's realities will continue tomorrow in a tidy, linear and predictable fashion. Pure fantasy. In this sort of culture, you won't find people who pro-actively take steps to solve problems as they emerge.

8. "Organisation doesn't really accomplish anything. Plans don't accomplish anything, either. Theories of management don't much matter. Endeavours succeed or fail because of the people involved. Only by attracting the best people will you accomplish great deeds."

In a brain-based economy, your best assets are people. We've heard this expression so often that it's become trite. But how many leaders really "walk the talk" with this stuff? Too often, people are assumed to be empty chess pieces to be moved around by grand viziers, which may explain why so many top managers immerse their calendar time in deal making, restructuring and the latest management fad. How many immerse themselves in the goal of creating an environment where the best, the brightest, the most creative are attracted, retained and, most importantly, unleashed?

9. "Organisation charts and fancy titles count for next to nothing."

Organisation charts are frozen, anachronistic photos in a work place that ought to be as dynamic as the external environment around you. If people really followed organisation charts, companies would collapse. In well-run organisations, titles are also pretty meaningless. At best, they advertise some authority, an official status conferring the ability to give orders and induce obedience. But titles mean little in terms of real power, which is the capacity to influence and inspire. Have you ever noticed that people will personally commit to certain individuals who on paper (or on the organisation chart) possess little authority, but instead possess pizzazz, drive, expertise, and genuine caring for teammates and products? On the flip side, non-leaders in management may be formally anointed with all the perks and frills associated with high positions, but they have little influence on others, apart from their ability to extract minimal compliance to minimal standards.

10. "Never let your ego get so close to your position that when your position goes, your ego goes with it."

Too often, change is stifled by people who cling to familiar turfs and job descriptions. One reason that even large organisations wither is that managers won't challenge old, comfortable ways of doing things. But real leaders understand that, nowadays, every one of our jobs is becoming obsolete. The proper response is to obsolete our activities before someone else does. Effective leaders create a climate where people's worth is determined by their willingness to learn new skills and grab new responsibilities, thus perpetually reinventing their jobs. The most important question in performance evaluation becomes not, "How well did you perform your job since the last time we met?" but, "How much did you change it?"