

# Lessons Learned from Colin Powell

Powell summarizes his approach to leadership with a great one-liner, "Leadership is the art of accomplishing more than the science of management says is possible." Leadership is both an art and a science, and there is often a gap between the state of the art and the state of the practice.

The following are Colin Powell's lessons on leadership, in quotes, along with some commentary:

- **Lesson 1. *"Being responsible sometimes means pissing people off."*** The right thing to do isn't always the popular thing to do. Making the tough calls means taking a stance. When you take a stance, not everybody will agree. The worst scenario is a conflict of values. This means people will be divided, and if you try to make everybody happy, you'll make nobody happy.
- **Lesson 2. *"The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have lost their confidence that you can help them or concluded you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership."*** If people bring you their problems, it's a good thing. At a minimum, it means they think you're listening. When people stop bringing you their problems, it's a sign you've failed them as a leader. When people no longer share their problems, you lose touch with what's going on.
- **Lesson 3. *"Don't be buffaloes 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."*** Don't undermine your own instincts, insight and perspective. Respect opinions, but don't blindly adopt them. It's one thing to be right in theory; it's another to be right in practice. There is a lot of space between theory and practice where your perspective can help shape a better result.
- **Lesson 4. *"Don't be afraid to challenge the pros, even in their own backyard."*** If something doesn't add up, challenge it. Challenge the people around you to grow. It's easy for people to stagnate. Push people to continuously raise their bar and achieve new levels of performance. One of the best ways is by asking the tough questions.
- **Lesson 5. *"Never neglect details. When everyone's mind is dulled or distracted the leader must be doubly vigilant."*** Stay on your toes and be careful of what can slip through the cracks. The details are where the rubber meets the road. Some of the best leaders I know always walk the processes to get first-hand experience. This helps them understand and rationalize how things fit together in the bigger picture. Some people mistake this for micro managing, but it's preparation for more effective delegation or for direction and coaching.
- **Lesson 6. *"You don't know what you can get away with until you try."*** This is about asking for forgiveness over asking for permission.
- **Lesson 7. *"Keep looking below surface appearances. Don't shrink from doing so because you might not like what you find."*** You have to be ready to face the music. The sooner you know the real situation, the sooner you can deal with it.

Getting to the bottom of things can also be a great way to gain perspective on problems and treat root causes versus chasing symptoms.

- **Lesson 8.** *"Organization doesn't really accomplish anything. Plans don't accomplish anything either. Theories of management don't much matter. Endeavors succeed or fail because of the people involved. Only by attracting the best people will you accomplish great deeds."* It's about the people. Empower people and get out of the way. Unblock them. If you can't trust people to do the right thing, then you don't have the right people.
- **Lesson 9.** *"Organization charts and fancy titles count for next to nothing."* Opinion leaders, people with influence, people who get results, or control resources or have expertise, don't necessarily map to what's on the organizational chart.
- **Lesson 10.** *"Never let your ego get so close to your position that when your position goes, your ego goes with it."* You are not your job. Perform your role to the best of your ability, but don't get caught up in it.
- **Lesson 11.** *"Fit no stereotypes. Don't chase the latest management fads. The situation dictates which approach best accomplishes the team's mission."* Use the right tool for the job, and be flexible in your approach. Pay attention to the results you're getting and if it's not working, change it.
- **Lesson 12.** *"Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier."* Stay forward-looking, focus on solutions, and create opportunities. The spirit of possibility is contagious.
- **Lesson 13.** *"Powell's Rules for Picking People: Look for intelligence and judgment, and most critically, a capacity to anticipate, to see around corners. Also look for loyalty, integrity, a high energy drive, a balanced ego, and the drive to get things done."* This is about finding people that are self-driven and exercise good judgment. If you have to tell people what to do or if you can't trust people to make the right decisions on their own, that's not leadership, that's baby-sitting.
- **Lesson 14.** *"Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate and doubt, to offer a solution everybody can understand."* The ability to get everybody on the same page is priceless. Often, arguments are simply about different views or perspectives. Sometimes, people can't follow because of ambiguity. Your ability to frame a situation or speak in plain English can go a long way towards moving things forward or bringing people together for a common cause.
- **Lesson 15. Part I:** *"Use the formula  $P=40$  to  $70$ , in which  $P$  stands for the probably of success and the numbers indicate the percentage of information acquired."* **Part II:** *"Once the information is in the 40 to 70 range, go with your gut."* This is about balancing data and information gathering with your instincts. Learn to trust your gut (which is about trusting your experience.) Sure you'll make mistakes, but you'll also learn. In the real world, you don't have infinite time to explore every problem until you have all the possible information.

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Instead, it's about sacrificing to get things done. You have to find potential solutions that fit and test them against reality to see what sticks.

- **Lesson 16.** *"The commander in the field is always right and the rear echelon is wrong, unless proved otherwise."* In my experience, the people closest to the problems are often in the best position to see the solutions. The key here is to empower and not be the bottleneck. One of my leadership trainers said to think of it like a tree. Push as many decisions as you can to the leaves and branches, while you worry about the trunk.
- **Lesson 17.** *"Have fun in your command. Don't always run at a breakneck pace. Take leave when you've earned it: Spend time with your families. Corollary: surround yourself with people who take their work seriously, but not themselves, those who work hard and play hard."* Show your human side. People follow people they can relate to. If you act like a machine you create a barrier for trust. You will also wear yourself down over time. Balance, downtime, and rejuvenation are keys to being your best.
- **Lesson 18.** *"Command is lonely."* It's lonely at the top. Being in charge means operating at a different level than being best buds or being everybody's friend. It's about serving a role for the greater good or the good of the group.