

George Washington on Leadership

From the war room to the boardroom, hone your leadership skills with timeless lessons from history's greatest leaders.

This first installment in our new series examines the leadership principles of George Washington, who was not only a magnificent military leader, but also a successful businessman.

FIND YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE. Effective leaders find their own style based on their individual personalities, whether it be aggressive, persuasive, or somewhere in between.

Washington was a "follow me" type who, as President John Adams once said, "Possessed the gift of silence." He did not publicly upbraid subordinates; rather, he exercised authority achieved through personal bravery and a persuasive style.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH THE BEST. Washington encouraged America's most astute young men to join him in the Continental Army and, later, in his presidential cabinet. He culled those who failed to measure up. His first administration featured polar opposites, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, and potential rivals, Secretary of War Henry Knox and Attorney General Edmund Randolph. One key to Washington's success was in selecting the best and then reducing any friction through his own skillful leadership.

LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES. Washington, who had never commanded more than a regiment prior to 1775, evolved into an effective Continental Army commander in chief by emerging from every setback a smarter leader. He offered two insightful tips: First, "It is better to offer no excuse than a bad one"; and second, "We ought not to look back unless it is to derive useful lessons from past errors, and for the purpose of profiting by dear-bought experience."

MAKE THE BEST OF A TOUGH SITUATION. During the Revolutionary War's early years, Washington faced a lack of supplies, horrible weather, poor morale and combat failures. Yet he stayed the course, pressing Congress for more supplies, instituting drill and training systems and rebuilding a war-winning army. He turned adversity into the forge for creating strong, resilient units.

DO WHAT IS BEST FOR THE ORGANIZATION. Washington always put his army and his nation first. There was no clearer example of this than when, at the end of the Revolutionary War, many suggested that he be made king. Horrified by the prospect, Washington firmly declined, knowing that a monarchy would destroy the new republic.

LEAD BY ACTION RATHER THAN WORDS.

Washington clearly recognized that his acts – bravery, ethical behavior and deeds – spoke louder than his words. In 1783, however, he used both to defuse a threat to American liberty, the Newburgh Conspiracy. Continental Army officers, dissatisfied with Congress over lack of payment and unpaid pensions, threatened to establish a military government. Washington met with them at the encampment near Newburgh, New York, and began the meeting by saying he wished to read a letter from Congress addressing the situation. He reached into a case and slowly removed a pair of glasses. Since Washington was rarely seen wearing glasses, it caught the men's attention. He

then said, "Please permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." This bit of showmanship won the hearts of all present and the crisis soon passed. *

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