

Theodore Roosevelt

His legacy is much more than simply “speak softly and carry a big stick.”



Col. Theodore Roosevelt atop his mount in 1898 while in camp at Montauk Point, New York. He and his Rough Riders spent time in quarantine there after returning from Cuba.

From San Juan Hill to Capitol Hill, “Teddy” Roosevelt stamped his name in history books as a social reformer, military officer, president, and – belatedly, in 2001 – Medal of Honor awardee for heroism during the Spanish-American War. But what made him such an effective leader?

Rise to the Challenge

Teddy Roosevelt was a man of action who sought high office and a platform that would allow him to make an impact on things that mattered to him. He understood the need to accept and embrace challenges. He realized that by doing so, great deeds could be accomplished. He once said, “If there is no war, you don’t get the great general; if there is not a great occasion, you don’t get a great statesman; if Lincoln had lived in a time of peace, no one would have known his name.”

Having passion for a mission and displaying confidence in it is extremely powerful in convincing others to follow commands. Contemplating successful leadership, Roosevelt declared, “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

Following his victorious return from the Spanish-American War, Theodore Roosevelt was elected governor of New York in 1898. During his time in office, he fought hard to rid the state of corruption and established himself as a strong candidate for the vice presidency of the United States, an office to which he was elected two years later with running mate William McKinley.

Do Not Fear Mistakes

Many business managers tend to be overly cautious. Such an attitude signals timid leadership, wherein those in charge create an environment in which mistakes – and the potential to capitalize on daring progress – are not allowed to occur. Roosevelt thought differently, saying, “The only man who never makes a mistake is the man who never does anything.”

Give People the Chance to Succeed

Roosevelt gave his subordinates ever-increasing responsibilities to see if they would measure up. This helped him to decide who would advance in his organization. In examining successful companies and military units, it is important to remember Roosevelt’s belief that “big jobs usually go to the men who prove their ability to outgrow small ones.”

Character Counts

Character, or inner strength, is a critical determinant of how well an individual will perform, irrespective of the challenge. Persons of strong character are trusted with making momentous decisions and are instrumental in helping to shape great businesses as well as great armies. Roosevelt strongly believed in the importance of moral fiber, saying, “Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike.”

Dare to Win

It is easy to follow the path of least resistance or to hide when tough decisions are on the table, since those who are not part of the decision-making process cannot be blamed for any resulting failure. Roosevelt understood the need to take appropriate risks, declaring, “Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure ... than to rank with those poor souls who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.” *

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