

On Leadership and Decision Making



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As I write this article, our country is preparing for each major political party's nominating convention. The process of primaries, debates and conventions that culminate in the November election points out, among other things, the leadership and decision-making skills of our elected officials. Whether you are democrat or republican, live in a blue or red state, the skills of these elected officials are an important component in governing our country for the next four years.

I recently re-read Colin Powell's book "My American Journey," which chronicles his rise from an ROTC student to senior advisor to three presidents. Embedded in this book are his perspectives on leadership and decision making that I believe have universal application. Many are quoted below and serve as an excellent framework for all to use.

On humane leadership: "when they fall down, pick 'em up, dust 'em off, pat 'em on the back, and move 'em on." (P.46)

"Leadership is solving problems. 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 you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership." (P. 52)

On 'experts': "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." (P. 102)

From Admiral Hyman Rickover: "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." (P. 172)

"Leadership is the art of accomplishing more than the science of management says is possible." (P.264)

"Don't be stampeded by first reports. Don't let your judgments run ahead of your facts. And, even with supporting facts in hand, question them if they don't

When weighing the use of U.S. combat forces abroad: "1) Commit only if our or our allies' vital interests are at stake. 2) If we commit, do so with all the necessary resources to win. 3) Go in only with clear political and military objectives. 4) Be ready to change the commitment if the objectives change, since wars rarely stand still. 5) Only take on commitments that can gain support of the American people and the Congress. 6) Commit U. S. forces only as a last resort." (P. 303)

On speaking of command: "When we are debating an issue, loyalty means giving me your honest opinion, whether you think I will like it or not. Disagreement, at this stage, stimulates me. But once a decision has been made, the debate ends. From that point on, loyalty means executing the decision as if it

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add up. Something deeper and wiser than bits of data inform our instincts. I also learned that it is best to get the facts out as soon as possible, even when new facts contradict the old. Untidy truth is better than smooth lies that unravel in the end anyway. Avoid putting a spin on a story that subsequent revelations may discredit. Be prepared to see an international event expand—or contract—for political ends apart from its intrinsic meaning. And finally, in a world bristling with engines of destruction, don't be surprised if they explode from time to time." (P. 285)

were your own...If you think something is wrong, speak up. I'd rather hear about it sooner than later. Bad news isn't wine. It doesn't improve with age...I will give you clear guidance as to what I want. If it isn't clear, ask me. If after a second or third explanation you still don't get it, there may be something wrong with my transmitter, not your receiver. I won't assume you are deaf or stupid...From time to time, I'm going to make you mad as hell. Making people mad was part of being a leader." (P. 320-321)

On picking people: "What I looked for was intelligence and judgment, and most

critically, a capacity to anticipate, to see around corners. I also valued loyalty, integrity, a high energy level, a certain passion, a balanced ego and the drive to get things done.” (P. 355)

On decision making: “Put simply, it is to dig up all the information you can, then go with your instincts. We all have a certain intuition, and the older we get, the more we trust it. When I am faced with a decision—picking somebody for a post, or choosing a course of action—I dredge up every scrap of knowledge I can. I call in people. I read whatever I can get my hands on. I use my intellect to inform my instinct. I then use my instinct to test all this data. ‘Hey, instinct, does this sound right? Does it smell right, feel right, fit right?’ However, we don’t have the luxury of collecting information indefinitely. At some point, before we can have every possible fact in hand, we have to decide. The key is not to make quick decisions,

but to make timely decisions. I have a formula, $P = 40$ to 70 , in which P stands for probability of success and the numbers indicate the percentage of information acquired. I don’t act if I have only enough information to give me less than a 40 percent chance of being right. And I don’t wait until I have enough facts to be 100 percent sure of being right, because by then it is almost always too late. I go with my gut feeling when I have acquired information in the range of 40 to 70 percent.” (P. 393)

On great leaders: “Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who cut through argument, debate and doubt, to offer a solution everybody can understand.” (P. 395)

In conclusion, Colin Powell’s Rules sum it up best.

1. It ain’t as bad as you think. It will look better in the morning.
2. Get mad; then get over it.
3. Avoid having your ego so close to your position that when your position falls, your ego goes with it.
4. It can be done!
5. Be careful what you choose. You may get it.
6. Don’t let adverse facts stand in the way of a good decision.
7. You can’t make someone else’s choices. You shouldn’t let someone else make yours.
8. Check small things.
9. Share credit.
10. Remain calm. Be kind.
11. Have a vision. Be demanding.
12. Don’t take counsel of your fears or naysayers.
13. Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.

Hopefully the newly elected city, county, state and national officials will heed these words of wisdom. May you also benefit in your personal and professional lives.