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Leaders to Follow

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LEARNING LEADERSHIP

By Sara Tusek



General Colin L. Powell, 65th US Secretary of State

"Effective leaders are made, not born." This quote from former U. S. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, from an address at Stanford University in November 2005, poses an intriguing question: are leader born, or are they made?

POWELL'S QUALIFICATIONS

Retired four-star general Powell is in a unique position to comment on this question, following a successful career spanning service in the military, the federal government, and non-profit.

In the United States military, during his 35-year military career, Powell held a range of

command and staff positions, including National Security Adviser and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest military position in the Department of Defense.

Subsequently, Powell served as chairman of America's Promise, a national nonprofit organization supporting youth, and then was appointed as Secretary of State (2001–2004) under President George W. Bush.

Having worked with people from a wide variety of social backgrounds, educational levels, ethnicity, citizenship and responsibility, Powell's perspective on leadership development is one of breadth and depth. He has used and developed his own natural leadership qualities (adding more skills in the process), while helping many thousands of people develop leadership skills and accomplishments in their careers.

Drawing on his broad experiences in military and civilian life, Powell said at Stanford, "Leadership is all about people...and getting the most out of people." It is about conveying a sense of purpose in a selfless manner, he said, and creating conditions of trust while displaying moral and physical courage.

"Never show fear or anger," he added. "You have to have a sense of optimism."

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LEARNING LEADERSHIP

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Sara Tusek, Editor
830-13 A1A North, #317,
Ponte Vedra Beach FL 32082

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Powell listed some key leadership lessons in his comments to the Stanford audience.

1. Successful leaders know how to “define their mission, convey it to their subordinates and ensure they have the right tools and training needed to get the job done.” This element of communication is essential in developing clear lines of authority, making provision for future decisions and imbuing everyone involved with the same vision and goal.
2. “They learn from trial and error, and from experience. When something fails, a true leader learns from the experience and puts it behind him.” It’s tempting for a leader to deny or cover up mistakes; it’s also destructive. Mistakes have a way of popping up again, causing more confusion and lack of unity in a team than if the mistakes were simply acknowledged and dealt with immediately. It’s hard to learn from a mistake when it’s ignored.
3. Speaking as a military leader, Powell noted that “The first way you take care of the troops is to train them. Then you have to trust them and let them get on with their work.” This advice seems to counsel leaders to avoid micro-management, or standing over the shoulder of people. The effective leader conveys trust in those whom he or she has trained, allowing them to make mistakes, if necessary, on the path to becoming leaders in their own right.

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LESSON SUMMARY

Powell noted to his audience of aspiring business executives that good leaders also must know how to reward those who succeed and know when to retrain, move or fire ineffective staff. He stressed the need for continual team-building, to be sure that the people involved are fully trained for their jobs and fully committed to the team’s vision.

“When you get all these [factors] together in place, the place starts to hum,” Powell said. “You know you’re a good leader when people follow you out of curiosity.”

“Effective leaders are made, not born,” Powell said. “They learn from trial and error, and from experience.” This is a liberating lesson for leader, as Powell (from his life experience as an unusually successful leader) reassures his hearers that no one mistake is “unfixable.” Rather, mistakes can be turned into learning opportunities, spurring changes in attitudes and procedures that will make future success more likely.

When something fails, Powell concluded, a true leader learns from the experience and puts it behind him. “You don’t get reruns in life,” he said. “Don’t worry about what happened in the past.” This wise advice will serve leaders well as they learn to lead.

Much of this information is from the Stanford Report of November 2005