

"Soldier, Statesman, Peacemaker
Leadership Lessons from George C. Marshall"

Jack Uldrich

Kindle Notes by Dave Kraft

Among the greatest lessons we can learn from Marshall are his nine principles of leadership:

1. Doing the Right Thing: The Principle of Integrity
2. Mastering the Situation: The Principle of Action
3. Serving the Greater Good: The Principle of Selflessness
4. Speaking Your Mind: The Principle of Candor
5. Laying the Groundwork: The Principle of Preparation
6. Sharing Knowledge: The Principle of Learning and Teaching
7. Choosing and Rewarding the Right People: The Principle of Fairness
8. Focusing on the Big Picture: The Principle of Vision
9. Supporting the Troops: The Principle of Caring

If a matter came down to "doing something right" or "doing the right thing," he always chose the latter. He was candid. Marshall never shied away from telling people-especially superiors-what they needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear. True leaders find a way to lead regardless of their position, stature, or age. His willingness to "go right straight down the road, to do what is best, and to do it frankly and without evasion." In Marshall's book, neither friendship nor favoritism had a place in making decisions. He did not want to become intoxicated by the perks of power or allow personal fondness for the president to cloud his judgment. Marshall's willingness to do the right thing made him an intimidating force in his own right. It was not his job to parrot the views of his civilian superiors for the sake of political expediency. As Bill George once said, "Integrity is not just the absence of lying, but telling the whole truth, as powerful as it may be." "I thought that it was far more important in the long run that I be well established as a member of the team and try to do my convincing within that team, than to take action publicly contrary to the desires of the president and certain members of Congress."

Intel Corporation has a similar policy. It is called disagree and commit. The policy actively encourages people to openly and freely disagree with proposed policies or actions, but if the person is overruled (after his arguments have been heard and considered) he is expected to fully commit to the idea. In short Marshall was unwilling to penalize someone for taking action just because the outcome was unfavorable. The ability and willingness of individuals to take action was one of the key characteristics he looked for in his subordinates. Woodrow Wilson once said, "Those only are leaders of men ... who lead in action ... it is at their hands that new thought gets its translation into the crude language of deeds." "Man is made for action." This was one of Marshall's favorite statements. It reflects his strong belief that an imperfect act taken quickly was frequently superior to a "perfect" action taken later. Marshall demonstrated that it wasn't necessarily the size of the act that mattered. Rather, it was the simple fact that an action was taken. In his book,

On Becoming a Leader, Warren Bennis quotes former Lucky Stores executive Don Ritchey, who said: "Even if you're pretty analytical by nature, you have to be willing to make a decision somewhere short of certainty. You just haven't got the time or the resources ... you have to get 80 percent or 85 percent of it and then take your best shot." It is an approach that General Marshall would have well understood-and supported. "You have to have the guts to try something. "Step out and do something. What if you do make a mistake?" "I am not interested in the explanation ... I am interested in the result." the essence of the third leadership principle of George C. Marshall: serving the greater good-the principle of selflessness. Only Marshall had the ability to stand up to the powerful personalities of Churchill, Joseph Stalin, Charles de Gaulle, and Chiang Kai-shek.

He responded to Roosevelt's offer by simply saying, "I will serve wherever you order me, Mr. President." To emphasize his point, Marshall added that the president should "feel free to act in the best interest of the country" and not "in any way consider my feelings." George Marshall never considered the personal implications when he weighed a decision or took an action. As Secretary of War Henry Stimson said to Marshall on May 8, 1945-the day Germany surrendered-"No one who is thinking of himself can rise to true heights. You never thought of yourself." Sometimes his selflessness required that he make decisions or take actions that could have been harmful to his prospects for personal advancement. He was always focused on the needs of the institutions rather than his own interests. Marshall wasted precious little energy worrying about the little slights that so often divert lesser men. After the war, Marshall continued to demonstrate his ability to rise above personal attacks, even when they were anything but petty. Marshall never imagined that his power emanated from himself.

Rather, his power came from the institutions he had the privilege of serving, and he never used that power to serve his own needs-he deployed it only for the benefit of his country. As soon as an ulterior purpose or motive creeps in, then the trouble starts and will gather momentum like a snowball.

Jim Collins argues in his book *Good to Great* that when recruiting a new CEO, today's boards of directors would be far better served by looking for the qualities associated with selflessness than concentrating on "the need to hire larger-than-life, egocentric leaders."

It could be argued that Marshall's candor played an instrumental if not the integral role in his career. Wedermeyer, Marshall snapped, don't you ever fail to give me your unequivocal expression of views. You would do me a disservice if you did otherwise.

Marshall elaborated on why he was so adamant on this the point when he said, "Unless I hear all the arguments against something, I am not sure whether I've made the right decision. I mean exactly what I say, and there is no use trying to read between the lines because there is nothing there to read." "I am disappointed in all of you. You haven't disagreed with a single thing I have done all week. He understood strong leaders must not only be willing to accept criticism and divergent points of view, they must go out of their way to consistently create an atmosphere conducive to candor.

Many people in business today pay lip service to the importance of candor yet are quick to "shoot the messenger" or penalize individuals if they offer assessments that run counter to their own ideas. Warren Bennis was even more succinct when he wrote in *Fast Company* in September of 2004 that "cultures of fear abound." He pointed to the Space Shuttle disasters at NASA, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal within the army, and the USA Today plagiarism case as classic examples of institutions that encouraged their people to keep their mouths shut and their heads down. Bennis stressed that the solution was for leaders to make it psychologically safe for people to speak up. Good leaders do more than encourage candor. They seek it out. When you disagree with my point of view say so, without an apologetic approach." By emphasizing a policy of "truth over harmony," Brown has continually avoided problems by encouraging "intense candor." I am not a diplomat. I mean exactly what I say.

By adhering to Marshall's unbending principle of candor, today's business and political leaders may not always achieve popularity but, chances are, they will find something even rarer-and far more valuable: respect.

"Put it on a single page." George Marshall demanded brevity. He often said that if a problem hadn't been reduced to a single page, it had not been sufficiently thought through. People who cannot express themselves quickly are simply wasting other people's time.

Peter Lynch, the well-known mutual fund manager who has encountered many CEOs, has said that if a CEO couldn't tell his company's story in less than two minutes something was wrong-namely. A leader's primary role is to teach. People who work with you have to feel you're willing to share what you've learned." Effective leaders understand that if their organization is to grow, it is essential that

they have leaders in place to sustain that growth-which means they need to take the lead in training the next generation of leaders. Warren Bennis once wrote: "Leaders are, by definition, innovators. They do things other people haven't done or don't do. They do things in advance of other people. They make new things. They make old things new. Having learned from the past, they live in the present, with one eye on the future. "

I am awfully tired of seeing mediocrity placed in high positions.

-George C. Marshall

Marshall understood that talented people could only perform to their full potential if he delegated authority to them, and supported them when they exercised that authority. Marshall's approach to delegating authority and supporting subordinates can best be summed by this simple statement of his: "We, in headquarters, live in order that people in the field may carry out their orders." that one of the hallmarks of effective leadership is simply supporting the people to whom the task of getting the job done has been delegated. Marshall was secure enough in his qualified judgment of people to support them when they made honest mistakes, or were unfairly attacked by others. Marshall even supported General George Patton in a confrontation with Admiral Ernest King, the navy's top officer, who had grown so weary of battling Patton for resources that he asked Marshall to relieve him. Marshall refused King's request, saying that the same qualities that made Patton so difficult to work with were the same qualities that were so useful on the battlefield.

The largest measure of his success, however, stemmed from the simple fact that Marshall realized everyone, at some level, had merit. And he realized it was his job as a leader to assess their merit and then give them an appropriate amount of responsibility.

Marshall always made it a habit to free up his subordinates to focus on the task at hand, once saying: "Concentrate on the battle with the feeling that it is our business to support you and not harass you and that I'll use all my influence to see that you are supported." if the right people were put in the right job at the right time, the right results would follow. Picking the right people is one job that no leader can delegate. Delegation is not a natural reaction for most people, but effective managers understand it is essential and they work at developing the skill. It was a tribute to Marshall's ability to get everyone to focus on the big picture. Peter Drucker has a comparable saying: "First things first, second things not at all."

Marshall refused to accept the allure of easy answers and always thought through the long-term consequences of his decisions. it is the leader's job to see to it that overly bureaucratic rules are not allowed to prevent activities or stifle initiatives that are in the strategic interest of the organization. "If we can make a plan for unified command now, it will solve nine-tenths of our troubles. " Marshall offered this quote when the allies needed to act as a single unit. His underlining motivation was a strong desire to get all the allies focused on the most strategic goal-defeating

Germany. The same thinking prompted him to reorganize the War Department during the early part of World War II and reduce the number of people who reported directly to him from sixty to six. Focusing on what is truly important isn't always popular-but it is necessary for ensuring the integrity and long-term success of any organization.

Marshall's willingness to protect and support his troops first lies at the heart of Marshall's ninth leadership principle-the principle of caring. "Morale is primarily a function of command." George Marshall issued this comment upon hearing from a general that the morale of his troops was low. "We are going to take care of the troops first, last, and all the time." Marshall often said that "wars are won by the side that accomplishes the impossible" Always you have honored us by your frankness, charmed us by your courtesy, and inspired us by your singleness of purpose and your devotion to our common cause." I quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Great men exist that there may be greater men."