

# FINANCIAL POST

## Lessons in Revolutionary Leadership

Taking a page from the George Washington story

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Spencer Platt, Getty Images

I just finished reading David McCullough's book about the first year of the American Revolution, 1776. The book (and the HBO mini-series) tells the story of those who marched with George Washington in the year of the Declaration of Independence, a year that saw few victories, and a staggering amount of disease, suffering, defeat, desertion and disillusionment.

Few people today have an appreciation for how precariously close this grand experiment in democracy came to being snuffed out in its infancy, on some occasions literally being saved by shifts in the wind. Many of the leadership traits, behaviors and approaches Washington employed during that perilous year would be equally applicable today, more than 200 years later.

What made Washington such an effective leader?

He learned from his mistakes

Throughout the course of his career, Washington endured a series of catastrophic military defeats, lost more battles than he won, and was generally regarded as a poor military tactician. In the face of these travails, he let experience be his best teacher, never appearing dispirited in front of his troops, and gradually learning to utilize the strengths of those around him to compensate for his weaknesses.

His integrity was unquestionable

Given our contemporary concern with the ethical behavior of leaders, Washington's character and integrity are especially noteworthy. He was widely perceived by friend and foe alike as honest and loyal, and although supremely confident, very rarely acted out of self-interest. Time and again, he came out of retirement at his beloved farm at Mt. Vernon to serve his country, and the

fact that someone of his stature and financial standing (in 1776 he was one of the 10 richest men in the American colonies) would fight on behalf of independence gave the whole effort much needed credibility and legitimacy.

He was cool under pressure

As early as 1754, at the age of 22, while fighting (ironically) on behalf of the British in western Pennsylvania during the Seven Years' War, Washington showed conspicuous courage under fire and a marked ability for leadership during a crisis. "I heard the bullets whistle; and believe me there is something charming about the sound," he wrote about his early experiences in battle. Stories also abound about Washington putting himself at uncommon physical risk during the Revolutionary War, confidently instructing troops while chaos reigned around him.

He united everyone with a common vision

Throughout 1776, sectional differences within the Continental Army threatened to tear it apart. Soldiers from New England and Virginia had little respect for one another's backgrounds, cultures and abilities, even to the point of sometimes refusing to serve together. By the force of his will, and his ability to inspire, motivate and persuade, Washington focused those people who populated it on a goal far greater than themselves -- the cause of independence.

He empowered his employees

Long before collaboration and worker participation became the norm, Washington was pushing decision-making down throughout his organization. His two most trusted aides, Nathanael Greene, a Quaker who was made a general at age 33, and Henry Knox, a 25-year-old Boston bookseller, were often trusted to make and execute key decisions. Washington realized that in an organization in which very few people had substantive expertise or experience with matters military, any idea deserved a fair hearing, no matter the age, rank or hometown of the proponent. With this approach, Washington's army mirrored the non-hierarchical, decentralized organizational structures of today.

He kept his leadership team together

With the exception of Vietnam, the Revolutionary War was the longest conflict in U.S. history, lasting nearly nine years. By the time ended, it had taken an estimated 25,000 American lives, or roughly 1% of the population. In the percentage of lives lost, it was also the costliest next to the Civil War. Almost miraculously, Washington did not lose a single key aide, confidant or advisor. People like Nathanael Greene and Henry Knox, who were with him at the beginning, were still standing by him at the end.

While the business challenges faced by today's leaders may not be quite as pressing as shepherding an infant country to safety during one of its darkest hours, incorporating some of Washington in our own approach to leadership may be quite helpful, nonetheless.

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