



Book George Washington on Leadership

Richard Brookhiser

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Recommendation

Richard Brookhiser, a National Humanities Medalist, is a popular author, journalist and biographer. Considering his stellar previous work about America’s founding fathers, as well as his deep knowledge of George Washington, you would expect his book about the first U.S. president’s leadership traits to be good. And so it is, interesting and full of well-told stories. Yet, it does falter sometimes. For example, the opening chapter lauds Washington’s prescience for installing latrines in his soldiers’ encampments. Such praise overlooks the fact that the Roman Army routinely dug latrines for its soldiers 2,000 years ago. Overall, Brookhiser usefully translates episodes from Washington’s life into management lessons for today’s executives, though it may strain the use of metaphor to rename his Mount Vernon plantation WashCorp and to classify the presidency as a start-up. Despite such small lapses, Brookhiser works many intriguing anecdotes into his narrative and demonstrates vividly just how Washington became such a significant leader. *BooksInShort* welcomes his history-based examination of how to use Washington’s leadership lessons.

Take-Aways

- George Washington inspired men, enthralled women and worked diligently to become a leader.
- Thanks to his sagacity, cleverness and hard work, he became America’s richest and most admired man.
- Washington was flexible. He knew when to cut his losses and try something new.
- Thoughtful and prescient, he planned and prepared for every contingency.
- Washington was a great leader because he could see the big picture while also attending to the details.
- Washington never lost faith in his promising young commanders, even when others did.
- He was magnanimous to his defeated enemies and to those who opposed him.
- Washington always maximized his physical assets to make a strong impression.
- He overcame a poor education by reading constantly throughout his life.
- Washington knew when it was time to step down as leader and did so graciously.

Summary

A Leader in Full

George Washington was an exceptional leader. He was the ideal man to head the American Continental Army and later to become the United States’ first president, its “founding CEO.” Washington became a leader early in life. At 21, he was commissioned in the colonial militia. After a notable, eventful career as an officer, he left the military. He then ran his Mount Vernon farm, a huge 2,500-acre enterprise in Virginia. He oversaw the 300 people who lived and worked on the giant estate. Washington did remarkably well as a gentleman farmer, and as a real-estate owner and speculator. He eventually became the wealthiest man in America. Washington’s life is a soaring lesson in the vital, even ennobling nature of leadership – what it is, what it entails and what it requires. The primary leadership lessons from Washington’s

inspiring life include:

- **Heed “the power of the obvious”** – George Washington became commander in chief of the American Continental Army in 1775. His first General Orders forbade “cursing, swearing and drunkenness.” He insisted that all soldiers attend “divine service.” He instructed his officers to have their men install latrines (“necessaries”) for all soldiers. Some Continental soldiers from rural areas were not very sanitary about their habits and Washington knew this would not do for thousands of men encamped together. He wrote, “The preservation of the soldiers’ health should be [the] first and greatest care.” Washington consistently demonstrated personal consideration for those he led.
- **Evaluate “the power of rules”** – The Constitutional Convention established the regulations and procedures for the U.S. presidency. The Constitution’s Article II, Section 2, states that the president “shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties.” Washington went to the Senate for counsel about treaties he wanted to sign with Native American tribes in Georgia and the Carolinas. The senators tediously debated the issue, thoroughly frustrating Washington, who said he would “be damned if he ever went there again” to consult about treaties. He did not, nor has any U.S. president since. Sometimes new rules need a “road test” to make sure they are sensible and efficient.
- **Change when necessary** – Gentleman farmer George Washington inherited his beloved Mount Vernon in 1761. He grew tobacco, then the primary cash crop in Virginia. A finicky plant, tobacco places great demands on farmers. Do one thing wrong and the crop will fail. When the price of tobacco dropped in 1766, Washington quickly went against convention and converted his fields to corn, buckwheat and other crops. A sage leader remains flexible and is always willing to try something new if change is required.
- **Plan for contingencies** – Smallpox was a killer in Washington’s day. The way to control it was to inoculate people and quarantine them. Those who survived became immune. This approach had a better mortality rate than just waiting for the disease to strike and spread. Washington ordered the inoculation of his troops as soon as they arrived at Valley Forge. One historian credited him for “the first large-scale, state-sponsored immunization campaign in American history.” Good leaders are proactive and prepared.
- **Know the importance of respect** – In 1775, the British Army tried to negotiate with Washington regarding a prisoner exchange and the possible surrender of the Continental Army, then in Manhattan. The English letter about these matters was addressed to “George Washington Esq. &c. &c. &c.” The American troops refused to accept the oddly addressed letter. Then the lieutenant colonel the British sent as an emissary to Washington produced the same letter, addressed the same way. Now, Washington himself rejected it. He understood that the British commander’s refusal to address him as General Washington meant that his opponents considered him, in effect, a “gentleman outlaw.” Washington knew that if the British could not show him respect, they would not respect the American cause. You will be ineffective as a leader if other leaders – as well as your vendors, suppliers, customers and employees – do not take you seriously.
- **Manage from the middle** – Thomas Jefferson said Washington managed his cabinet, on which Jefferson served, by acting as the hub of a wheel, with his cabinet members as spokes. “He formed a central point for the different branches of government,” Jefferson said. Many times, Washington would step in and “become the whole wheel,” assuming direct responsibility for the government’s actions and activities when necessary. Since then, many leaders have used Washington’s hub-spokes-wheel management tactic. It has served them well, providing insights, “energy and creativity.” But, often, leaders must depend less on the spokes – their close advisers – and instead act boldly and forthrightly. Indeed, that is leadership.
- **Must your personal attention** – As a military general, estate owner and president, Washington was always a master of details. One day, he observed that four carpenters working on his estate took a full workday to turn a 40-yard-long poplar tree into boards. The next day, Washington watched the men again, but this time he carefully performed a time-motion study. He determined that the men could be “four times as productive.” Washington was a fair but tough boss. He always made sure that the people on his payroll gave him a full measure of quality work every day. He wrote, “As you are now receiving my money, your time is not your own; [since] every hour or day misapplied is a loss to me.” Good leaders always know if their employees are being productive and maintaining quality standards.
- **Cultivate the ability to communicate** – When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he created one of history’s most inspiring documents. Washington was not a sparkling writer like Jefferson, but he could communicate well on paper. Even Jefferson said that Washington “wrote readily, rather diffusely, in an easy and correct style.” As a leader, Washington always did a great deal of official and unofficial writing: orders to his employees, officers and troops, and frequent correspondence to Congress, state governors and other officials. Washington relied on young officers on his personal staff to assist him. They could precisely relay Washington’s thoughts and ideas because he was a clear, logical thinker who taught them well and who never hesitated to express himself. Leaders must communicate effectively based on “firm beliefs, clear ideas and a strong personality.”
- **Learn to work with eccentrics** – Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, an expert on Prussian military tactics, was a major asset to Washington during the Revolutionary War. Von Steuben helped Washington shape the Continental Army into an efficient, disciplined military force. But the baron had some major drawbacks. Fluent in French and German, he spoke no English. Assistants had to translate all his commands and advice, including his frequent profanities. Washington chose to ignore as an isolated insult a letter from Europe that charged the baron with taking “familiarities with young boys.” Washington managed to work with von Steuben because he needed the baron’s help to win the war. Leaders sometimes must weigh staffers’ deficiencies – and ask if their positives outweigh their negatives.
- **Show faith in your subordinates** – In October 1776, the Continental Army suffered what was at that time its worst defeat, because of advice from Nathanael Greene, age 34, an inexperienced major general. Greene assured Washington that the Americans could withstand an attack against Fort Mifflin in northern Manhattan. He was wrong. The British easily conquered the fort and took nearly 3,000 prisoners. But Washington did not cashier his young general, who proved himself by winning major battles later. A strong leader does not give up on promising subordinates.
- **Deal with your old enemies** – After the U.S. won its freedom from England, many of the new nation’s founding fathers, including James Monroe, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, could not forgive the British. They all became bitter Anglophobes. Not Washington. He also refused to punish Americans who had supported the British during the war. Leaders must adopt a long-range view. Your enemy today may be your friend tomorrow. You and your organization do not benefit from recriminations.
- **Be courteous** – Washington worked hard at everything, including learning to become a gentleman. As a teenager, he transcribed and carefully studied “The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation,” 110 precepts for proper behavior compiled by French Jesuits in 1595. A leader must know how to behave properly.
- **Inspire others** – Washington motivated others by example, by his courageous and forthright nature, and by the way he spoke to them. In his first inaugural address, in 1789, Washington referred to his own “inferior endowments,” while extolling “the talents, the rectitude and the patriotism” of Congress. In his farewell address seven years later, he praised his fellow Americans for “the constancy of [their] support,” which had sustained his presidency. A masterful military leader, Washington also had an astute understanding of psychology. He inspired his men “to be brave by telling them they are.” When Washington addressed his soldiers before battle, he often said: “My brave fellows.” Translation (and surely what his soldiers heard): “My fellows, be brave.” Great leaders can summon the right words to energize and encourage their troops. To be a good leader, you must be able to inspire your people.

- **Maintain your appearance** – George Washington looked impressive. A big man in any era, Washington stood six feet two inches tall. He was hale and hearty with an imposing presence. He had “deep-set blue-gray eyes” and was always beautifully attired. Washington’s concern with his physical appearance began early in life. As a teenager, he wrote a highly detailed “memorandum to have [his] coat made by the following directions.” Washington knew how to charm women and had an equally positive impact on men. Trained as a surveyor, he was “intensely visual.” He always made sure that his attractive physical characteristics worked to his maximum advantage. Leaders should always appear well put together and professional.
- **Use your strength** – Washington was immensely strong, athletic and physically tough. Once, he broke up a fight between his soldiers, pulling two combatants apart and holding them “by their necks, like dogs, until they settled down.” During Washington’s famous march to Trenton, New Jersey, in December 1776, his horse lost its footing in the sleet and snow. According to a junior officer, Washington, an exceptionally skillful equestrian, “seized his horse’s mane and the horse recovered.” Restoring your balance in midfall is tough enough, but helping a half-ton horse right itself requires great strength. In any era, people admire leaders who are physically robust.
- **Be amiable** – His peers truly liked Washington. Indeed, he possessed the special quality of “sweetness,” according to biographer James Thomas Flexner. Abigail Adams commented, “Modesty marks every line and feature of his face.” The men who served under Washington revered him. In 1755, he was an officer in the Virginia Regiment, which protected the frontier during the bloody French and Indian War. One of his soldiers wrote, “Our colonel is an example of fortitude in either danger or hardships, and by his easy, polite behavior, has gained not only the regard but affection of both officers and soldiers.” In 1758, when Washington resigned from the Virginia Regiment, 27 officers signed their names to a glowing testimonial calling him an “excellent commander,” a “sincere friend” and a “man we know and love.” Leaders do not have to be likable to be effective, but being liked – even loved – as a leader certainly doesn’t hurt.
- **Pursue education** – Washington’s formal schooling ended in his midteens. This always bothered him. “I am conscious of a defective education,” he once wrote. But, throughout his life, he strove constantly to improve himself and to increase his knowledge. He read voraciously: the Roman philosopher Seneca, the Roman general Julius Caesar, as well as Edward Gibbon, John Locke and Voltaire. Washington studied the classics, but he also read widely about farming practices. A smart leader never stops learning.
- **Know when it is time to go** – John Adams succeeded Washington as president. Washington was always nonpartisan, and he was not involved in picking Adams as vice president or as America’s second president. However, Washington did provide an extremely valuable service to his successor: He stayed out of the picture. Washington knew that he was not irreplaceable. Indeed, he “dispensed with himself twice” – after the Revolution and at the end of his second presidential term. A great leader knows when it is time to step down and let others lead.

About the Author

Richard Brookhiser is a journalist, historian and biographer. A senior editor at *National Review*, he is the author of *What Would the Founders Do?*, as well as popular biographies of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton.
