



Book Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun

Wess Roberts
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Recommendation

Wess Roberts draws on the life experiences of the leader of the Mongol hordes to craft imaginative monologues on leadership - an attribute as valuable today as when Attila united the Huns in 415 AD. The advice is general. Its effectiveness probably depends on how well you apply it, although the idea of an historic icon of barbaric vengeance counseling us in cultural sensitivity seems a bit of a stretch. While the treatment is certainly colorful, you might worry about ways some modern-day chieftains could misuse Roberts's principles to justify their own Visigoth approach to management. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to those looking for new and interesting ways to approach the perpetual management issues of building teams, inspiring loyalty, setting goals and achieving objectives.

Take-Aways

- Your success as a manager depends on inspiring your troops to strive for a common objective.
- Articulate a goal everyone can understand.
- Remain open to adopting new techniques if others' ideas are working better than yours.
- Disagreement is not disloyalty. However, if you wish to be respected, you must find a way to overcome opponents who work to thwart your aims.
- Dedicate yourself to inspiring the development of new leaders within your organization. This requires training and persistence.
- Set an example for your followers by constantly striving to improve your deficiencies. Demonstrate your willingness to work with them and, when necessary, to lead them into battle.
- Be decisive. All decisions carry an element of risk.
- Use good judgment. Do not commit yourself to a course of action until you fully understand its implications.
- Never attain by war what you can attain by negotiation.

Summary

The Attila School of Management

Attila the Hun is an unlikely subject for the study of leadership. Against all odds, Attila united barbarian hordes into a nation of Huns against. He was driven to accomplish his objectives to the point of executing opponents who stood in the way. While inspiring the respect and loyalty of his allies and the fear of his adversaries, he managed to motivate the racially diverse Huns to pursue the shared goal of building an empire.

Historical Context

The nomadic Huns lacked both purpose and organization prior to Attila's reign. He was born in 395 AD in the Danube River valley. The son of a tribal king, he learned the arts of war from earliest childhood; he was still a child when his father died. Tribal leaders sent him to the Roman court of Honorius as a hostage. While making several attempts to escape, he studied Roman ways. When he returned to the Danube, Attila used his knowledge to begin his ascent to power.

“By their own actions, not their words, do leaders establish the morale, integrity and sense of justice of their subordinate commanders. They cannot say one thing and do another.”

When Attila's brother died, he became the new chieftain. He immediately began to unite the proudly independent Hun tribes, in part by executing chieftains who failed to support him. His ultimate objective was to conquer Rome, Constantinople, and the world. Attila was sufficiently skilled to amass 700,000 Hun warriors. He led this army against the Romans near Chalons. The Roman leader Aetius defeated him and more than 162,000 warriors died.

“Once a chieftain has delegated responsibilities, he should never interfere, lest his subordinates come to believe that the duties are not truly theirs. Such superficial delegation yields to fury in the hearts of subordinates.”

Attila retreated to the Danube and began the grim task of completely overhauling his army. In the process of undergoing rigorous training, he forced the Huns to forsake their nomadic lifestyle. Attila drilled his soldiers day after day and, gradually, Hun society became more stable.

Attila returned to the field of battle and marched his army to Italy. He won a major victory and threatened Rome itself, only to be dissuaded by Pope Leo I, who visited him personally. Attila returned home, resumed his executions of rebellious chieftains, and took a new wife. He died under suspicious circumstances in his wedding bed, but he left behind a united Hun civilization.

“For the time being, as in centuries past, it seems to be the nature of the human being to acquire leadership traits a little at a time - building upon previously learned precepts.”

Attila's example shows that any organization's success depends on its ability to develop leaders with certain qualities. These qualities include loyalty and the willingness to "eradicate" those who refuse to act in the tribe's best interest. Understand, however, that disagreement is not necessarily disloyalty.

If You Want To Lead the Huns

If you want to be in charge, first establish the atmosphere in the office - or in the army - you want to lead. General morale changes from day to day, but the leader must exercise a degree of control over the group's spirit. To avoid chaos, the leader must obey and enforce the organization's rules. The leader communicates this philosophy by action; talk alone is not enough. Attila's rules of leadership include:

- Engender a strong bond of trust with associates, superiors, and subordinates.
- Set very high performance standards. Demonstrate no patience for those who lack the commitment to attain them.
- Expect your followers to improve continually as they gain knowledge and experience.
- Encourage your associates to be creative and innovative as long as their activities fit the group's overall goals.
- Direct your people; never allow them to wander aimlessly.
- Expect more from your organization's leaders than from its members.
- All leaders must know the responsibilities of their office.

- As a chief, you must effectively teach others what is expected of them.
- Conduct frequent inspections to assure performance meets expectations.
- Never abuse your power or authority.
- Be willing to endure great personal sacrifice for the welfare of those you lead.
- When resources are short, never favor your own needs over the tribe's needs.
- Encourage competition but do not allow it to detract from attaining common goals.
- Understand that the spirit of the law is greater than the letter of the law.
- Wear honor, morality, and dignity like a cloak and never take it off.
- Never form selfish relationships with subordinates, peers, or superiors.
- A successful chief must nurture a profound commitment to duty above ambition.

“You must remember that success in your office will depend largely on your sustained willingness to work hard. Sweat rules over inspiration!”

Attila counsels leaders to be fearless, undaunted by obstacles. A leader must possess a passion to lead. Other important characteristics of effective leadership are emotional stamina, physical stamina, empathy, decisiveness, anticipation, timing, competitiveness, self-confidence, accountability, responsibility, credibility, tenacity, dependability, and stewardship.

Attila on Making Good Decisions

Decisiveness balances the need to act with the need to use sound judgment. Be alert to signs that a decision is not perfect, since few decisions are. For instance, if you have to work hard to get other people to agree with your choice, it probably isn't a wise decision. If you can't accept your decision's anticipated result, seek another option. Don't let difficult circumstances or fear of failure deter you from making a necessary decision.

“It is never wise to gain by battle what may be gained through bloodless negotiations.”

However, if you have the time and opportunity for further consideration, do not rush a decision unnecessarily. Once you make a decision, review it periodically to assess its soundness and to improve your future decision-making. Remember these key elements:

- Allow subordinates to make decisions equal to their responsibilities.
- Accept the responsibility of your office or you will tend toward indecisiveness.
- Next to knowing when to make a decision, knowing when not to decide is most important.
- Understand the issue before you take action.
- Timing is the most important element in decision-making.
- If you can't make up your mind, restate the problem. Skepticism will help you avoid bad decisions.
- Purposeless uncertainty and hesitation indicate leaders promoted beyond their capabilities.
- Avoid making decisions that favor leaders at the expense of staff.
- Try not to let your emotions make your decisions.
- Leaders are rewarded for the quality of their decisions; followers are rewarded for how well they support and carry out those decisions.
- In difficult circumstances, a leader who lacks self-confidence will lose his followers.

Sharing Common Values

Attila's leadership principles emphasize the importance of common values, customs, and practices in uniting a corporate "tribe" in the quest for an objective. This gives the "tribe" a sense of identity. A leader should promote morale and discipline, which are key values. The reward of a higher position should be balanced by the greater responsibility it confers. A leader should maintain an appearance likeliest to inspire the loyalty of his troops. Lead by example with tireless effort, keeping the welfare of the people foremost in mind. As a leader, you must be decisive, making choices after prudent consideration.

How Attila Delegates Authority

A wise chieftain must also know when to delegate responsibility to others. One person cannot lead an entire nation alone. If you cannot trust your subordinates, your organization will fail. Once you delegate a task, do not interfere in the way someone gets it done. Do not dictate precisely how you wish your assignments to be executed. If you do, your staff members will never develop their abilities to your satisfaction and they will conclude that delegated responsibilities are not really theirs to bear. Attila has these recommendations about the art of delegation:

- Never delegate a task that calls for your personal attention.
- Delegate a task to the one best suited to accomplishing it.
- You are responsible for the accomplishment of all tasks, including ones you have delegated, even though you should hold your subordinates responsible.
- Do not hesitate to help with designated tasks if your subordinate requests it.
- You cannot accomplish everything by yourself.
- Delegate important assignments even to inexperienced subordinates. This is necessary to accomplish your mission, develop your staff members' abilities, and demonstrate your trust in them.
- Select associates to whom you are comfortable delegating tasks.
- If an associate tries to accomplish a task and fails, punishment is not advisable.

Responding to Adversity

Be willing to bend to another's viewpoint. When you are secure, you can allow reason to prevail. Appreciate and recognize other people's competence. As a leader, learn to negotiate effectively, for you should never gain by battle what you could earn through persuasion.

“Learn from defeat! If you fail to sharpen your leadership prowess after confronting unconquered obstacles, your experiences were for naught....”

Attila's terrible defeat at the hands of the Roman leader Aetius shows how to avoid similar massacres on the corporate battlefield. Above all, be careful of the inadvertent tendency to make enemies. Do not allow petty responses to make enemies for you. Only make enemies with deliberate purpose, because once you have an enemy, you must be committed to vanquishing your foe. When you must go to battle, choose your enemy carefully. Keep these ideas in mind:

- Even if you are king do not expect everyone to agree with you.
- Remain wary of clever and conniving associates, and yet be approachable by others.
- If your enemy remains unreasonable even after you attempt to negotiate, save your energies. Find another way to overcome.
- Never underestimate your opponents. Never underestimate the power of an enemy, no matter how weak, to recover and rise up against you.
- Do not assume that all opponents are enemies. Confrontation will occur inside and outside of your organization, but whether these opponents become enemies is often up to you.
- Do not try to make everyone behave the way you believe they should.
- Never delegate an assignment and then try to manage it yourself...you will only make an enemy out of your over-managed subordinate.
- Only lose your temper when you stand to gain by it.
- Never give your enemy an advantage under any circumstance.
- Miss no opportunity to deceive your enemy. Never allow him to see what, who, or where you really are.
- Since your goal is to completely neutralize any enemy, never make an enemy who is unworthy of your total effort.
- Seek to use your enemy's weakness to your advantage. If the enemy proves too powerful, retreat so that you may return to defeat him another day.
- Never cast an insult unless you mean it.

“Chieftains must understand the spirit of the law is greater than the letter of the law.”

A leader should reward workers appropriately for their accomplishments, but not spoil them. Never reward someone for doing less than expected. Accept that you will not win every encounter. An effective leader learns from setbacks and goes on to develop the

next generation of leaders.

About the Author

Wess Roberts, Ph.D., is a California-based writer who offers management lessons drawn from offbeat topics. His other books include *Make It So: Leadership Lessons from Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Protect Your Achilles Heel: Crafting Armor for the New Age at Work*, *Victory Secrets of Attila the Hun*, and *Straight A's Never Made Anybody Rich: Lessons in Personal Achievement*.
