

LEADERSHIP

Warren Bennis

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# Excellence

THE MAGAZINE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

SEPTEMBER 2011



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Leadership Consultant

**Innovative  
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<p><b>WALT ZEGLINSKI</b> <i>Positive Accountability</i> Create a committed and engaged culture. . . . . 3</p> <p><b>BOB KELLEHER</b> <i>Employee Engagement</i> Take 10 practical steps to drive results. . . . . 4</p> <p><b>EDWARD E. LAWLER III AND CHRISTOPHER G. WORLEY</b> <i>Management Reset</i> You can aim for and achieve sustainability. . . . 4</p> <p><b>JEFF DYER, HAL GREGERSEN, AND CLAYTON M. CHRISTENSEN</b> <i>Innovative Teams</i> Attend to people, process, and philosophy. . . . . 5</p>	<p><b>DONNA HICKS</b> <i>Leading with Dignity</i> Gain dignity intelligence. . . 6</p> <p><b>Laurie Bassi, Ed Fraunheim and Dan McMurrer</b> <i>Good Company</i> Make the grade on the good company index. . . . 7</p> <p><b>DAVID PARMENTER</b> <i>Band of Brothers</i> Learn lessons from Horatio Nelson. . . . . 8</p> <p><b>MARGOT MORRELL</b> <i>Lessons for Leaders</i> Learn from president Ronald Reagan. . . . . 9</p> <p><b>DENNIS REINA AND MICHELLE REINA</b> <i>Seven Trust Busters</i></p>	<p>Avoid seven common fatal mistakes. . . . . 10</p> <p><b>BARB ARTH</b> <i>High-Impact LD</i>. . . . 10</p> <p><b>CY WAKEMAN</b> <i>Reality-Based Leaders</i> Delegate effectively. . . . 11</p> <p><b>D. LUKE IORIO AND ZACKARIE LEMELLE</b> <i>Engaging Greatness</i>. . 12</p> <p><b>MERWYN HAYES AND MICHAEL COMER</b> <i>Lead with Humility</i>. . . 13</p> <p><b>CHIP R. BELL</b> <i>Courageous Leaders</i> . 14</p> <p><b>AL WATTS</b> <i>Integrity</i>. . . . . 14</p>	<p><b>STEPHEN PARKER AND DAVID RIPPEY</b> <i>Corporate Values</i>. . . . 15</p> <p><b>DAVID ROCK</b> <i>Active Thinking</i>. . . . 16</p> <p><b>PAMELA HAWLEY</b> <i>Memo to CEOs</i>. . . . 16</p> <p><b>JOSEPH MICHELLI</b> <i>Prescription for Excellence</i>. . . . . 17</p> <p><b>DOUG MORAN</b> <i>Great Leadership</i>. . . . 18</p> <p><b>DAVID K. MURRAY</b> <i>Have a Plan B</i>. . . . . 19</p> <p><b>MICHAEL FEUER</b> <i>Secrets to Making It Big</i> Take these five steps . . . 20</p>
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# Band of Brothers

Learn lessons from Horatio Nelson.



by David Parmenter

IN TRAFALGAR SQUARE stands a large monument to Lord Nelson. It is said that much of the funds to build the 170-foot-high monument came from sailors who survived the many torrid battles Nelson masterminded.

I explore Nelson's achievements through a model of *winning leadership*. This model looks at leadership from two perspectives: 1) what foundations stones need to be in place in order to lead? and 2) what traits does a leader need to master in order to be effective? Nelson had *five foundations stones*.

**1. Minimize personal baggage.** He knew how past experiences can color behavior. While he lacked the tools now available to leaders to understand better his own personal baggage, he maintained an active counsel with his band of brothers who kept him largely on the straight and narrow.

**2. Love thy neighbour as thyself.** Winning leaders have *integrity, honesty and love of the common man*. Nelson demonstrated these traits many times; for example, upon capturing a Spanish ship, he returned the troops to Spain unhurt. After battles, he would rescue as many of the foreign sailors as possible. When visiting injured sailors, he gave a guinea to nurses who cared for the sailors. He also gave his Nile medal to a widow who mentioned that her late husband's medal never arrived.

**3. Master communications and PR.** From an early age, Nelson understood that he needed to self-promote. He was never slow in ensuring his feats were recorded correctly in dispatches to the Admiralty. Letter writing was part of his day, whether it be dispatches to inform the Admiralty, the daily requirement in running a fleet of ships, or sending condolences to family members of dead crew. There are over 2,000 letters in collections worldwide.

**4. Use mentors and have a safe haven.** Nelson was blessed with a series of mentors—wise individuals who could see the potential in Nelson and became trusted advisers to him. Nelson's entry into a Naval career

began early when his Uncle Maurice Suckling took him on as a ship boy and facilitated Nelson's first captaincy at the age of 21. He learned warfare from Captain William Locker, who pointed out that the way to beat a French boat was to "lie up close to her."

**5. Be fearless in your pursuit of legacy.** Nelson knew as a youth that he would be famous and save the English from a French invasion. His conviction that he was the person for the job was contagious; and, leading up to the battle of Trafalgar, Nelson had achieved the fame he so much desired—being revered by the adoring British Public. Nelson permanently changed the navy. He left the fleet with sea captains who were at the forefront of sailing, *adept at applying modern techniques, knowledge-*



*able in the detail management required to ensure a fleet was well provisioned and who excelled at sailing in battle.*

## 14 Winning Traits

From this platform Nelson's 14 winning leadership traits included:

**1. Crisis management.** Nelson was great in a crisis. His skills separated him from other admirals. His speed in making decisions left others in their wake. For great leaders, time stands still in a crisis. Nelson was famous for his humor and uplifting spirit in testing moments, including at the large dinner on board *HMS Victory* for his band of brothers, on the eve of the Battle of Trafalgar.

**2. Abandonment.** Nelson challenged the old thinking that had been part of the Navy for centuries. He changed the welfare of sailors by emphasizing the importance of fresh fruit and vegetables. He looked after the sailors' prize money and their share of taken vessels. Nelson *radically reshaped naval warfare*, ensuring the French fleet never had a chance.

**3. Decision making.** Nelson was very decisive. He could make the hard calls, and rely on his gut instinct when information was not available. His *gut instinct* led to the British fleet locating the French fleet moored by the Nile mouth off shore from Egypt. It was his rapid decision to go straight into battle, even though dusk was upon them and the danger of friendly fire was very real, that left the French so unprepared.

**4. Recruiting and promoting.** Nelson surrounded himself with competent captains, creating a *band of brothers*. He was quick to spot young talent—lieutenants and captains who showed the same attributes as himself were quickly moved up the ranks. He absorbed them into his *band*, overseeing their careers.

**5. Abundance of positive energy.** Nelson never gave up his pursuit of the French fleet (chasing them around the Mediterranean and through the straits of Gibraltar in a mad dash to the West Indies and back). He liked to celebrate. Every evening and lunch was a time for a large sit down meal with his captains. After the Battle of the Nile, he met annually with all the captains to celebrate the victory. Nelson could talk with the sailors from all decks. They knew he had started as a Captain's boy below decks. He knew their hardships, language, humor. *He was a one of them.*

**6. Positive relationships with stakeholders.** Nelson kept the Admiralty informed. He ensured that while he might override an admiral's decision (using his blind eye at the Battle of Copenhagen) the Admiralty knew the reasons—and that he should have been in-charge. His control over the situation meant that he was never reprimanded for his seemingly reckless actions. He kept *healthy working relationships* with key suppliers. He wrote to them often, discussing quality of supplies and pricing. He made it clear what was expected and that any cheating would be found out and mean a loss of contract.

**7. Student of psychology.** Nelson realized that sailors could be coerced in to battle but would be happy to raise the white flag unless they had a real fire in their belly. He created a "all for one and one for all" mentality within the fleet and was quick to sort out captains who did not manage their men well.

**8. Creating the future.** Nelson could visualize things ahead and plan accordingly. Extensive planning was needed to maintain an eight-month blockade of the French fleet. Ships had to be freed from duty for repairs and fresh provisions organized. He ensured that his ships and crew were better provisioned,



fitter, healthier and better trained than the French. Thus, in a tough contest, the British fleet would prevail. He was aware of the risks and discussed tactics endlessly over meals with his team so that all the captains knew what to do in the heat of battle that was best for the fleet. They would act as one, a *band of brothers*.

**9. Managing critical success factors.**

Nelson's motto in battle was to *get up close* to the French. He knew the British ships could fire their cannons more frequently and quickly and gain submission after some carnage on both sides. The sailors followed Nelson's view that *death in combat was a noble way to go*—and survivors were assured a *share of the spoils*.

**10. Champion of innovation.** Nelson was innovative. In one sea battle, he boarded a ship only to find a better one alongside. So, he jumped to storm the bigger prize, the San Josef. Such was the surprise that both captains surrendered to a smaller force. Nelson challenged all the old ways of running a navy. With his band of brothers, he introduced innovation across the navy.

**11. Execution.** Nelson was excellent at execution. He saw his role as finishing off any threat from the French on the seas. After the Battle of Trafalgar, Britannia ruled the waves for 100 years.

**12. Develop, engage and trust.**

Nelson had the knack to energize others. He selected captains and crew that shared his passion for the Navy and the need to succeed over French and Spanish fleets. He gave recognition freely to his staff. To him, gratitude was all part of the day's work for a leader. He knew his team inside out and remembered sailors for decades.

**13. Valuing results and people.**

Nelson had ambitious goals. He was always ready to take the French on—no matter what the odds. Trusting on teamwork, a shared objective, and a do-or-die attitude. While being a sailor in Nelson's fleet meant a retirement was not guaranteed, sailors and officers knew that when not in battle their livelihood was very much at the forefront of the commander's mind.

**14. Gather and learn from experiences.** From an early age, Nelson managed his experiences and his career. At the age of 12, he was a cabin boy on his first sea voyage. He sought to sail with captains known for their abilities. He used his uncle's connections to secure the opportunities that a gifted leader should have. *He left nothing to chance.* LE

David Parmenter is speaker on performance management and author of Key Performance Indicators (Wiley) and The Leading-Edge Manager's Guide to Success. (Wiley) [www.davidparmenter.com](http://www.davidparmenter.com)

**ACTION:** Learn and apply lessons from Nelson.

## Lessons for Leaders

*From the great communicator.*



by Margot Morrell

COLLEGE GRADUATES of 1932 faced a bleak future. Unemployment stood at 24 percent. The Dow Jones Industrial Average hit bottom at 41.22 on July 8, 1932. But one newly-minted graduate of tiny Eureka College refused to be daunted.

That gloomy summer, young **Ronald Reagan** had a series of conversations with his mentor, Sid Altschuler, a cheery businessman from Kansas City. As the two chatted one evening, Altschuler pointed out that the depression would not last forever and then asked Reagan a life-changing question, "What do you think you'd like to do?"

Like most people, Reagan hadn't thought about his future in that way. So for the "next several days and sleepless nights," Reagan wrestled with Altschuler's question and faced his own "future with the realization that no good fairy would whisper in my ear and answer the question of what did I want to do."

Altschuler's question prompted Reagan to review the successes he had achieved so far in life. He had often been cast as the leading man in high school and college plays. At Eureka, he had won varsity letters in football, swimming and track. Working on a political job, he had earned the astronomical sum for the era of \$250. Ten years later, at the peak of his Hollywood acting career, he told an interviewer that he realized his "heart was in dramatics, football and politics." With extraordinary clarity, he had identified his lifelong interests. Throughout his life, every time his career stalled, he took time to re-examine his innate talents and strengths.

In the summer of 1932, Reagan decided he wanted to entertain people and that he loved sports. Seeking a way to combine the two interests, he zeroed in on a career as a sportscaster. Altschuler didn't have any contacts in broadcasting. What he did have to offer Reagan was advice. He approved of the choice of a career in a growing



industry and told Reagan "to start knocking on doors" and to take any job just to get his foot in the door.

Reagan followed Altschuler's advice to the letter. Putting mentors' advice into action was one of Reagan's distinguishing strengths. He hitchhiked to Chicago and spent a frustrating week, pounding the pavement and sleeping on a friend's sofa. On Friday, he headed home in the rain with seemingly little to show for his efforts. At WMAQ, Chicago's NBC affiliate, though he had met a young woman who gave him some much-needed encouragement. Less than a year later, thanks to Altschuler and this one contact, Reagan was on his way to being a radio star in the "solar plexus of the country."

Altschuler's question had reframed his thinking. Instead of thinking about "a paycheck and security," Reagan focused on what he "would be happy doing for the next few decades." In 1942, Reagan summed up his thinking on career planning, "Love what you are doing with all your heart and soul" and "believe what you are doing is important." And, "If, when you get a job, you don't believe you can get to the top in it, it's the wrong job."

Reagan's story is as much a parable as it is history and a model for anyone starting out in life. From an unpromising beginning, Ronald Reagan coached himself to the top of five separate professions—sportscaster, actor, union leader, public speaker, and politician. His life and career didn't always go smoothly. Four times his life slammed into a brick wall—a heartbreaking divorce from Jane Wyman, the collapse of his movie career, the termination of his relationship with General Electric and a hard-fought loss to Gerald Ford in the 1976 primary campaign for president.

*And yet every single time, he picked himself up and kept going.*

Today we think of Ronald Reagan as remarkably successful. It's heartening to remember that, like the rest of us, he faced challenges and hardships at the beginning of his adult life. He once said, "You've got to work for the thing you love, you always do." LE

Margot Morrell speaks at conferences and universities on leadership and overcoming challenges, and is author of newly released Reagan's Journey—Lessons from a Remarkable Career and the best-selling Shackleton's Way. She worked on the Reagan Transition Team in 1980. Visit [www.LEADERSHIPLIVES.COM](http://www.LEADERSHIPLIVES.COM).

**ACTION:** Learn from the Great Communicator.