



Leadership Lessons from Eisenhower

The General and President demonstrated many valuable traits applicable to leaders today

Tim Stevenson

FEW PERSONS IN history wielded power and authority comparable to that held by Dwight D. Eisenhower.

As Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, he exercised authority over the top generals of multiple nations. As President of the United States for eight years, he managed the early days of the Cold War, deftly setting policies, often with an opposing Congress.

A political leader can always be criticized for specific decisions. Regardless, Ike demonstrated through his long career of public service many attitudes and traits of excellent leadership that are still instructive for leaders today. Here are seven.

1. Leadership can be learned

Ike didn't emerge at birth as a great leader. He went through years of growth and development, as we all must. He said,

The one quality that can be developed by studious reflection and practice is the leadership of men.

There exists a persistent and common misconception that you must fit a certain mold to be a successful leader. I call it the "Conventional Model" – Tall, good-looking, assertive, verbal, magnetic, charismatic, and confident. Though companies and organizations continue to view people through that lens, it has been decisively disproven by both history and research.

A person of any temperament and personality type can improve and succeed as a leader if he or she has the desire and willingness to put in study and effort at personal growth. Eisenhower concurs.

If you are interested in more on this, I recommend my book, *BETTER: The Fundamentals of Leadership*, available at Amazon.com.



Tim Stevenson • Certified Executive Coach
E-mail: csc.tstevenson@yahoo.com • Phone: (469) 585-3982

StevensonCoaching.com • @StevensonCoach

Author of *BETTER: The Fundamentals of Leadership* available at Amazon.com

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2. Raw authority is not enough

When Eisenhower assumed the Presidency in 1953, his predecessor, Harry S. Truman, predicted a difficult time: “Poor Ike,” he said, “When he was a general, he gave an order, and it was carried out. Now he is going to sit in that big office, and he’ll give an order, and not a damn thing is going to happen.”

Truman misunderstood and underestimated Eisenhower. Even with all the authority of Supreme Commander in Europe, Ike never relied solely on authority to lead. He said,

The art of leadership is deciding what to do, and then getting men to *want* to do it.

If you ask mediocre managers why their people should do what they say, they often respond, “Because I’m the one in charge. Do it or I’ll get somebody else.” They think authority alone is sufficient to motivate workers.

Holding an “organizational gun” to people’s heads is not leadership. Ike said, **“You do not lead by hitting people over the head. That’s assault, not leadership.”**

3. Authority is properly used to define purposes and values

While Eisenhower did not *rely* upon authority in his leadership, he knew when and how to use it when appropriate.

Operation Torch was the first major combined operation of the war, the invasion of North Africa on November 8, 1942. To counter the natural resentments and rivalries of the Allied forces, he issued this message:

I will clamp down on anyone who tries to start any trouble between the Americans and British under my command. There will be neither praise nor blame for the British as British or the Americans as Americans. We are in this together as Allies. We will fight it shoulder to shoulder. Men will be praised or blamed for what they do, not for their nationality.

In an age when it is typically delegated to HR Departments to promote values of inclusion and fairness, top business leaders should take note. Much favoritism, bigotry, and misbehavior would be stifled in short order if senior leaders would come out openly, speaking with conviction, demonstrating justice and fairness, and insisting that the organization be a pure meritocracy. Where performance and proven leadership ability are the criteria for advancement, the rest dissipates.

4. Living authenticity

Leaders get the kind of behavior they demonstrate. None of us is perfect, but it is possible to be **authentic** as a lifestyle.

First, Ike pointed out a leadership fundamental: **“You can’t be a leader and ask other people to follow you unless you know how to follow, too.”** In an organization, you must be rightly related to authorities above you before you have the right to exercise authority over those below.

Eisenhower held strong opinions and would share them directly, but he remained faithful and obedient to his authorities, General George C. Marshall and the President of the United States.

Managers who bad-mouth superiors and the company to their subordinates do not impress anyone. They only undermine their own ability to lead. People see right through them.

Second, Ike’s authentic **humanity** was the foundation of his leadership. British General Bernard Montgomery said of him,

He’s not the greatest soldier in the world. His real strength lies in his human qualities. He has the power of drawing the hearts of men toward him as a magnet attracts a bit of metal. He merely has to smile at you, and you trust him at once.

You can’t fake that quality, at least not for long. Authenticity is proven over time. The same can be said of **integrity**.

Ann Whitman was Eisenhower's personal secretary for eight years during his Presidency. Writing in her diary, she commented,

The President is a man of integrity and sincere in his every action. . . . He radiates this, everybody knows it, everybody trusts and loves him. But the Vice President [Richard Nixon] sometimes seems like a man who is acting like a nice man rather than being one.

5. Leaders must be visible

During the war, Ike didn't hide in an office:

Soldiers like to see the men who are directing operations. They properly resent any indication of neglect or indifference to them on the part of their commanders and invariably interpret a visit, even a brief one, as evidence of the commander's concern for them.

Many managers fail to appreciate that *being ignored* is one of the greatest demotivators for employees. On the contrary, as Ike says above, they find it highly motivating when their leader shows personal interest in them and in what they are doing. LBWA tours ("Leading By Walking Around") are highly effective tools.

6. Effective leaders seek contrary views

Far too many leaders are sensitive to any form of criticism and want to be surrounded by team members who don't disturb the peace.

Eisenhower practiced just the opposite. Once he was interacting with a young eager-to-please Lieutenant and he blurted out,

For God's sake, get out and find something wrong with the camp! It can't be as good as you say it is. Either you're not being frank, or you're as big a fool as I am.

In April 1961, newly inaugurated President John F. Kennedy presided over the epic failure

called the Bay of Pigs operation. Licking his wounds afterward, he asked Ike to join him for discussion and advice at Camp David. During those conversations, Ike asked JFK, "**Did you have everybody in the room to hear and ask questions?**" No, JFK admitted. He had presided over an echo chamber dominated by one point of view.

One year later in 1962, Kennedy faced one of the greatest challenges ever presented a President: The Cuban Missile Crisis. Having learned from Ike's advice, Kennedy assembled numerous people who held varying viewpoints. The crisis was resolved peaceably and well.

7. Leaders must manage themselves

The burden of leadership is responsibility, and that burden can be incredibly heavy. Eisenhower commented during the war,

When pressure mounts and strain increases, everyone begins to show the weaknesses in his makeup. It is up to the Commander to conceal his: above all to conceal doubt, fear, and distrust.

Why is this so important? He wrote,

Optimism and pessimism are infectious, and they spread more rapidly from the head downward than in any other direction.

Ergo, speaking of the power of **optimism**:

[It] has a most extraordinary effect upon all with whom he comes in contact. With this clear realization, I firmly determined that my mannerisms and speech in public would always reflect the cheerful certainty of victory—that any pessimism and discouragement I might ever feel would be reserved for my pillow.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was a remarkable man and leader. Any leader today can learn from his principles and example. **L**