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LESSONS OF LEADERSHIP FROM A STRONG WOMAN – ISABELLA OF CASTILE



Isabella of Castile could easily be named as one of Europe's greatest Queens. It has been argued that of all Europe's Queens, none of them had a greater impact than Isabella of Castile. Pope Alexander VI named Ferdinand and Isabella "The Catholic Monarchs." She is also known as *Isabel la Católica* (Isabel the Catholic), and Queen Isabella.

She was born in 1451 to John II of Castile and his second wife, Isabella of Portugal. Isabella was third in line to the throne after her older half-Brother Henry and her younger Brother Alfonso. In 1454 her father died and her half-brother ascended to the throne as King. This was a time of turmoil for Isabella as King Henry did not want to support them. Isabella alongside her mother and younger brother were banished to Arevalo where the living conditions were poor. Due to her mother's mental illness, she turned to religion for comfort.

Isabella later married Ferdinand of Aragon, who was actually her cousin, but only due to agreeing the conditions that she could keep her independence when the time would come for her to rule Castile. Marrying Ferdinand created a union between Castile and Aragon after Ferdinand's father John II of Aragon died and he became King of Aragon. Her marriage to Ferdinand of Aragon would begin a decades-long partnership that would turn her medieval kingdom into a truly modern state. She reorganised the government, lowering crime, eliminating debt, and transforming Spain into a major world power. When Henry IV died on December 10, 1474, three days later Isabella was crowned Queen of Castile at Segovia.

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As Spain's power increased and large parts of Italy fell under its control, Isabella's personal and family problems grew. Her only son Juan died at age 19. Her first daughter Isabella, died in childbirth, leaving a baby grandson, who she also saw die. She had another three daughters, Catherine, Maria and Juana. Catherine of Aragon married first Arthur, Prince of Wales and then later Henry VIII as his first wife. Juana 'The Mad' looked to turn the crown of Castile over to her husband, Philip the Handsome, Duke of Burgundy.

Aside from united Spain, Isabella is also known for funding Christopher Columbus' explorations, which resulted in Spain's overseas empire and Spanish domination of Europe for the next century. It also resulted in the Christianisation of the peoples of Latin America and the use of Spanish as the lingua franca by millions.

By the time Isabella lay on her deathbed in 1504, she knew that Castile and Spain had been transformed. Her legacy continued long after her death and her exploits were remembered within Spain and amongst the Spanish speaking world. This is why in 1893, she was the first woman to appear on a United States coin.

Even if you are a woman you can still change the world

Both Isabella and her husband Ferdinand shared the power, instead of the power just being in the hands of the male. Together they established a code of law, strengthened the monarchy and facilitated the dismantling of power of the nobles within their kingdom. In the 15th century, women were expected to defer to their husbands. When it came time for Isabella to marry she would only take the hands of a man that would still allow her to keep her independence.

Isabella and Ferdinand began their marriage with a prenuptial agreement in place that established equality within the terms of their partnership. On this foundation, they built a highly effective coregency. During their reign, they supported each other in accordance with their joint motto: *Tanto monta, monta tanto, Isabel como Fernando* ("They amount to the same, Isabella and Ferdinand"). Isabella was not the type of woman who would sit back and let her new husband take over, she had no intention of handing over power to him just because he was a man. Their achievements together were remarkable. They united Spain. Under the crown, power was centralised. The Reconquista was successfully concluded. A legal framework was created. The Catholic Church was reformed.

What set Isabella apart from other female leaders before her is that she did not forfeit political power to her husband. Isabella had a thirst to make a great impact on Spain and she was not going to allow her husband to make all the important decisions. However, she would allow his helpful input, especially in regards to battles which he had much experience.

What the female leaders of today can learn from Isabella is, just because you are female does not mean that you are any less entitled to power. You will still have to fight for it but it is possible to achieve if you have the belief.

Do not be afraid to make decisions

Throughout Isabella's time in power she made some controversial decisions. Isabella was a pious Catholic, she focused on converting the citizens in her kingdom, as she believed this

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was necessary to have doctrinal uniformity to the Church. In 1492 she unleashed her Inquisition, she decreed that all Jews and Muslims must either convert or be expelled. This is a decision is still considered to be highly controversial and many would dislike Isabella for this. However, Isabella had a vision of the kingdom that she wanted to rule, and her Brother King Henry IV had left it in ruins. In her mind, the correct decision to make this happen was to have everyone be united with the same belief system.

All leaders at some point during their time in power will have to make difficult and bold decisions that not everyone will be like to or agree with.

Determination is key

One of Isabella's goals while she was in power was to conquer Granada. It took ten years for Isabella and Ferdinand to conquer Granada, with final victory in 1492. During this ten-year period, Isabella was determined and made sure her husband Ferdinand was kept to task. Centuries of slow Reconquista has left the Muslims with just one Spanish kingdom, based in Nasrid dynasty's Alhambra palace complex in Granada. Crusading against the infidel fitted Isabella's idea of herself as a God-appointed saviour of her country. Many treacherous battles were undertaken and numerous strategies were deployed. In January of 1492, the las Nasrid king Boabdil was forced to leave Alhambra. The Christian world was delighted. In London, Henry VII ordered a hymn of praise at St Paul's. In Rome, a Spanish cardinal Rodrigo Borgia organised bullfights and processions. Eight months later, Borgia became Pope Alexander VI, putting a Spaniard in the Vatican.

Isabella never gave up on what she sought to achieve and that in the end is what made all the difference.

The lesson to be learned by Isabella here is that whether you are a leader of a country trying to gain peace between another country or a CEO of a company trying to win market share, it is important to never give up. Continue to battle, explore different strategies, when one fails try the next. The worst thing a leader can do for their people is to accept defeat.

Be involved in all activities

Whilst her husband Ferdinand was the military expert, in the battles they fought as the monarchs of Spain, she shouldered half the responsibility. She educated her children and kept the story of Joan of Arc on her bookshelf. Although she was no frontline warrior herself, she became her own army's Quartermaster-General and Armourer. Isabella hired and deployed troops, conferred with Ferdinand on strategy, and raised money. Whilst it would've been easier for Isabella to leave all aspects of the battles to her husband this was not the way she wanted to rule her kingdom. This decision to assist Ferdinand allowed him to be more focused on physically fighting the battles with the other soldiers, which would have greatly contributed to the reasons why these battles were won.

It is imperative for leaders to be actively involved and across all areas they are responsible for. A leader must have some understanding of all processes being undertaken and take an interest no matter how big or small the matter is.

The first Monarch to conquer America

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1492 was remarkable for another reason besides the conquest of Granada. It was also the year that Isabella made the decision to fund Genoese sailor Christopher Columbus' voyage to the Americas. For seven years he had been in and out of Isabella's court trying to convince her to fund his mission as he promised huge returns. His original aim of the voyage was to travel to Asia, but instead Columbus found the Caribbean islands. While he was not the first European to reach the Americas, Isabella was the first Monarch to claim land and order for it to be colonised.

Isabella of Castile is a woman and a leader to remember for her strong will, her ability to overcome adversity and having a tremendous influence in a male dominated society.

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