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SOME LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL



"No crime is so great as daring to excel" Sir Winston Churchill

Sir Winston Churchill is widely regarded as the greatest leader of the twentieth century. In his ninety years, he spent fifty-five years as a Member of Parliament, thirty-one as a Minister, and nearly nine years as Prime Minister.

He had been present at or fought in fifteen battles, and had been awarded fourteen campaign medals, some with multiple clasps. He had been a prominent figure in the First World War, and a dominant one in the Second. He had published almost ten-million words, more than most professional writers in their lifetime, and painted over five-hundred canvasses, more than most artists. He had reconstructed a stately home and created a beautiful garden with three lakes and built a cottage and a garden wall. He was a fellow of the Royal Society, an Elder Brother of Trinity House, a Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, a Royal Academician, a University Chancellor, a Nobel Prizeman, a Knight of the Garter, a Companion of Honour and a member of the Order of Merit.

Many towns made him an honorary citizen, dozens of Universities awarded him honorary degrees, and thirteen countries gave him medals. He hunted big game and won many races. Estimates are that he consumed close to twenty-thousand bottles of champagne and the number of cigars is not recorded but would be voluminous. He had a family and many friends.

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Churchill was a giant in world history and actually stated, “History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.”

Some Leadership Lessons from Sir Winston Churchill:

1. **“Broadly speaking, the short words are the best, and the old words are the best of all.”**

Leadership in any endeavour requires communication. Leaders are speakers. Leadership requires convictional, bold and clear communication. As Edward Murrow summarises, Churchill did not just lead a nation by sending troops to war, he also “mobilised the English language and sent it into battle.” Churchill later noted “British people themselves had the heart of a lion – I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.”

2. **“I never worry about action, but only about inaction.”**

Leaders need to keep moving, not get caught in a rut. Action requires energy and momentum. If you want to achieve, keep moving forward.

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts.”

3. **“The first quality that is needed is audacity.”**

For Winston Churchill, he viewed audacity as the willingness to take bold decisions. Risks can be uncomfortable because with them comes the possibility of failure. Churchill felt that risks were necessary to achieve great things and balanced his audacity with the understanding that not all bold risks will be successful. When failure came he learned from it. His greatest failure was in World War One as the First Lord of the Admiralty. He oversaw the horrific mission to take control of the Dardanelles, which led to the slaughter at Gallipoli. He lost his office; he then went to France and served in battle. When he returned to public office he applied the lessons he learned to make him a better leader.

4. **“Kites rise highest against the wind, not with it.”**

People do not want to make the difficult or tough decisions, they do not wish to be contrarian or go against the tide of thought. Leaders who come forward, who have the courage of their convictions, who expose their true character, are defined by their decisions. Winston Churchill argued against the policy of appeasement and said, “An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile hoping it will eat him last.” Originally ridiculed for his stance on Hitler, he was later proven to be correct. He had the willingness to stand his ground and present his thoughts that went against the populist rhetoric of the day.

As a leader, do you follow the policy of company appeasement or do you truly lead?

5. **“Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.”**

Churchill’s attitude and steely conviction that Britain would not fall to Nazi Germany galvanised everyone, young and old, fit and unwell. Everyone believed in the following words:

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“We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender.”

6. **“If you’re going through hell, keep going.”**

All of us will go through difficult times, and we can either stop or as Winston Churchill suggests keep moving forward before you are burned beyond recognition. You may be singed, but keep moving. He knew the hell Britain would be going through when he addressed the House of Commons.

“I would say to the House as I said to those who have joined this government; I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I will say, it is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word, victory. Victory at all costs—Victory in spite of all terror—Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival. Let that be realised, no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail amongst men. At this time, I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say come then, let us go forward together with our united strength.”

7. **“You have enemies? Good. That means you’ve stood up for something, sometime in your life.”**

Doing the right thing sometimes will create ill will and enemies. The character of the person is displayed during these times when fortitude is required when human nature or the easier way is to care what others think and fall in line with consensus. It is more difficult when you have worked hard in your career or area of expertise to meet with disapproval of those around you.

After winning the war, a general election was held in Britain and stunningly Winston Churchill was defeated. However, living by his principles he returned as Prime Minister in 1951. Churchill had critics throughout his entire career and did not waiver from his beliefs and his determination to express and present them. He didn’t seek others approval and validation, he believed in pursuing what he felt was the right course of action and performing to the best of his ability.

8. **““Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in, except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”**

Churchill’s words are obvious in their meaning. Don’t give in or give up because the task seems too difficult or the obstacles too great. Think through and exhaust the possibilities.

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9. **“We are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glow worm.”**

Churchill had a most unhappy childhood which would have led to many people looking for excuses and self-pity in their later years. Instead he drew strength from it, and recognised to do things as a leader and in life, you need audacity, iron will and confidence in oneself. He believed in his abilities, he believed he should glow and as such he achieved against many odds, against many critics and against at times the tide of history.

10. **“Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities... because it is the quality which guarantees all others.”**

Churchill was a leader of world courage. When he spoke, a nation was given the hope and determination to fight a war that simply, against tremendous odds, had to be won. In fact, many of his friends and colleagues felt that Britain's future was lost in the very early days of the war. He refused to accept their opinions.

Churchill reminds us that leadership is impossible without true conviction even in the face of hostile opposition.

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