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Leadership Isn't About Making Everyone Happy

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 8 min read



Written by [AJ Powell](#)

At the end of the day, you won't please everyone, but then again, that was never what it was all about in the first place. Going into leadership with the thought that it ever was, is a mistake.

Let's just re-read the first part of that sentence one more time in order to let that sink in...

At the end of the day, you won't please everyone...

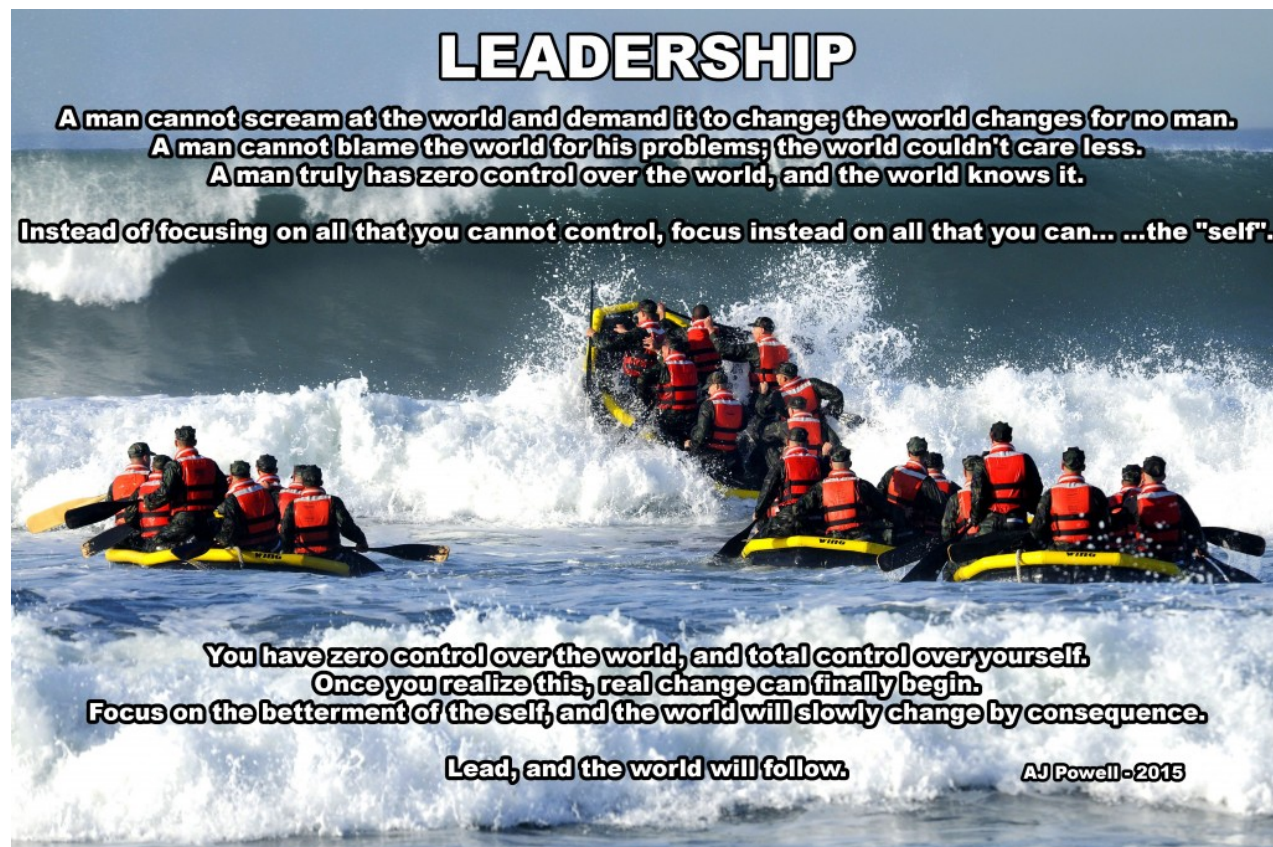
Whether it's your family or a team you're a part of, or even the organization you lead, your leadership will always be tested. However, what defines your life and your character is not that you've managed to get through the tests, it's how you chose to face those tests when they came. Having the integrity to stay true to your values, the courage to speak up when no one else dare, staying loyal to your friends, family, and coworkers, the drive to fulfill your duty and obligations – even if you don't like them, the understanding that selfless service is what makes achievement possible, and many more of these types of things, are all core values that make up great leadership, yes, but there is a dark side too.

Far too often do we find that people speak of leadership in a way that biasedly refuses to even acknowledge the existence of the hidden hardships that make up the realities of life. More than likely, this is because those negative things turn people off from the message. So people avoid talking about them just to keep the attention... but conflict avoidance will never solve problems. So right here, right now, let's just get something straight, shall we?

Life isn't fair, and it never will be. Get over it...
Or more to the case, get over yourself...

Did that turn you off from reading the rest of this? If you're a mature, reasonable person, it shouldn't... ... and that's the point.

Life is hard, cruel, insulting, often humiliating, and filled with mediocre people who all scream together that mediocrity is *the way*. Society will scream at you that life *should* be fair, that everyone *should* be happy, that leadership is all about “feelings” and “sensitivity”, and that good leaders are those who can please everyone... But that's all a fairy tale. The truth is, that the sooner you realize that life outside of your own actions is something beyond your control, and that no one is to blame for your life being what it has become except yourself, the sooner you will have taken that first step towards confrontation – which, believe it or not, is a starting step on the path to success.



The quote in this image is original to SSG AJ Powell (USA, Ret.) and expresses the very heart of Leadership Development as a process of individually motivated personal growth. The image was chosen because it represents the nature of the

message, and because it was an officially released photo authorized for use. As for the image itself, credit is always given to the source on The Warfighter Journal:

U.S. Sailors enrolled in the Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) course participate in surf passage at Naval Amphibious Base Coronado, Calif., Feb. 16, 2010. Surf passage is one of many physical evolutions conducted as part of the first phase of BUD/S training. (DoD photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kyle D. Gahlau, U.S. Navy/Released)

Confrontation in life is a necessary evil. Leadership development requires the individual to be willing to engage in confrontation with themselves over their own self-image and pride, and the act of leadership as a process often requires us to learn to deal with confrontation from others – which is an inevitable fact of life. Real leaders understand that pleasing everyone is not actually possible – not statistically, not socially, not even practically – and simply going along with the liberal demands of society that you should even try to do so doesn't make you a leader at all.

General Colin Powell (USA, Ret.) – arguably one of the greatest leaders of our modern age – once stated, “Being responsible sometimes means pissing people off.” As a leader, he understood that you will never please everyone, that confrontation is sometimes inevitable, and that you have an obligation as a leader to be responsible in your decision-making, which means some people won't like it. Harari (1996) stated in his review on Gen. Powell's words, “Trying to get everyone to like you is a sign of mediocrity: You'll avoid the tough decisions, you'll avoid confronting the people who need to be confronted, and you'll avoid offering differential rewards based on differential performance because some people might get upset.” (p. 34). (WOW! If THAT doesn't describe everything wrong with PC culture and nearly the entirety of Obama's presidency, I don't know what does!) There's real leadership wisdom in those words, **and in case you haven't realized this yet in your life, being a leader is all about not being mediocre.**

As a leader, I have always told my people, *if you've never offended anyone, then you've never stood for anything worth standing up for once in your life!* Now I'm not advocating that you start walking around insulting people left and right – have some professionalism and common decency for crying out loud – but I am saying that a leader must walk his or her own path, and that that path will eventually lead to confrontation with others because they will not like your decisions. Yes, there will be plenty of opportunities to work out differences, to strive for collaboration, and to make others happy, but there will remain an equal if not greater number of events to where someone will walk away unhappy, angry, or down right pissed off about your leadership decisions. **People [in general] these days are often beyond self-entitled, demand impossible to achieve amounts of respect, are more concerned with self-image, pride and self-esteem than they are about achievement, and seem to think their opinions carry equal worth and equal weight, even if they aren't the most intelligent person in the room.** So again, confrontation **will** happen. However, it's **your** job as a leader to understand this, and instead of caving, step up to the plate! Am I saying “the leader is always right”? NO! **Good leaders watch, listen, and learn, just as much – and often more – than they speak...** But *being responsible sometimes means pissing people off, and at the end of the day, you won't please everyone...* However, it was never your job to do so in the first place.

You need to remember that leadership isn't about being friends – and of course it isn't about making enemies either – and it's equally not about making everyone happy. It's about **the provision of purpose, direction, and motivation, while operating to accomplish the mission, and improve the organization.** Leadership is an act of *selfless service*, it's about *placing the mission and the teams needs ahead of your own*, about being *the* example, and having the *courage* to make the tough but responsible decisions. Trying to please everyone will only lead to failure, and that's the cold hard truth. Leadership isn't about surviving life's storms, it's about how you choose to face those storms in life when they come, and they **will** come. Life's full of hardships; it doesn't care if you're tired, exhausted, offended, weak, or poor, nor does it care one single little tiny bit about your feelings about it all either. The only things that matter are how you choose to face life. Sticking to your convictions will ultimately make some people angry. **Tough.** They will just have to learn to deal with it. So long as you are doing the right and honorable thing in the course of your leadership, you're on the right path...

...That's a lesson too many who discuss leadership choose to ignore, but one that is an essential piece towards taking the first step down **the road of success**, and one that ultimately needed to be said here.

Despite these things, even if people aren't happy with your leadership decisions right away, that doesn't mean they don't stand a chance to be happy down the road. But that's not your responsibility either. At the end of the day, they rule their own happiness, so it's up to them.

References:

Harari, O. (1996). *Quotations from Chairman Powell: A Leadership Primer*. Management Review, American Management Association. 85:12.

SOUND OFF!

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Take a moment to collect your intelligent, reasoned thoughts, then let us know what you think in the comments below!

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About the author



AJ Powell

AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.