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George Washington's Leadership Lessons

What the Father of Our Country Can Teach
Us About Effective Leadership and Character

James C. Rees and Stephen Spignesi • Wiley © 2007 • 214 pages

Leadership / Business Leaders

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Take-Aways

- George Washington is the ideal role model for strong, ethical leadership.
- A true leader's character inspires confidence.
- A leader has vision, and is well-organized and persuasive.
- An authentic leader must possess courage and bravery, as Washington demonstrated as commander of the Continental Army.
- Self-control and caution are vital to leadership.
- Washington was charismatic and well-respected.
- He strove for lasting honor, not power or fortune.
- A warning note for any would-be leader: Lose your temper and you lose.
- George Washington's strongest leadership trait was his determination.
- To lead and inspire others, you must take responsibility.

Recommendation

This book is rich with colorful vignettes, interesting facts and fascinating lore about George Washington, the first president of the United States. Author James C. Rees (writing with Stephen Spignesi) is both blessed and burdened with an abundance of facts, stories, quotes and tidbits of trivia about Washington. The author works mightily to correlate illustrative incidents from Washington's life with character lessons for today's corporate executives. Unfortunately, the connections are often a little forced, although the narrative remains interesting. Some of the things that Rees includes are fresh and valuable, such as his sidebar about Washington's Revolutionary War spy ring. But others are less compelling, like the verbatim rundown on all 110 of the civility rules that the Jesuits developed in the 1500s to instruct young men. They have passing relevance, in that as a child Washington copied them in longhand so he could memorize them. Yet many of the arcane dictums seem to have little to do with the famed general's life or character. Still, this intriguing, easy read provides a fond, useful lens for seeing Washington as a remarkable leader and a leadership role model on many levels. If your goal is to learn about leadership, *getAbstract* believes that George Washington has a lot to teach.

Summary

A True Leader

When America's founding fathers decided to rebel against England and fight for their fledgling country's freedom, they immediately turned to one man, and one man alone, to lead them in this vital struggle: George Washington. They all clearly understood that Washington was their natural leader. The life of this fabled American hero exemplifies 15 character lessons for today's leaders:

"Leadership Lesson 1 – A Leader Has Vision"

Although he was a slaveholder, Washington did not like slavery. He once said, "There is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of slavery." He freed his slaves in his will. Few of the other colonial leaders took such a bold step, but Washington believed that the new country could not sustain itself as a nation over the long term without eliminating slavery. He also allowed black men to serve in the Continental Army.

"Leadership Lesson 2 – A Leader Is Honest"

During the Revolutionary War, Washington's troops were poorly supplied and often went abjectly hungry. Nevertheless, Washington did not permit the soldiers under his command to commandeer victuals from the local farmers. That was stealing and Washington would not tolerate it. Later, America's other founding fathers asked Washington to lead the Constitutional Convention. Why Washington? Everyone thoroughly trusted him to deal honestly and forthrightly with their various – and sometimes conflicting – concerns.

“Leadership Lesson 3 – A Leader Has Ambition”

From his earliest days, Washington worked extremely hard to improve his lot in life. As a teenager, he carefully studied the Jesuits’ 110 venerable rules of civility and then he worked hard to apply them to build his character. This is one reason others always regarded him as a gentleman. He learned to be a surveyor so he could go to work at age 17, and he was paid handsomely for his well-honed skills. Early in his career, he joined the British Army in America because he believed it offered him the best chance to advance. As an up-and-coming leader, Washington even paid for dance lessons so that he could excel at this then-crucial social skill.

“Leadership Lesson 4 – A Leader Is Courageous”

In battle, Washington was completely fearless. As a young British Army colonel, Washington wrote in one of his many letters that he found the sound of bullets whistling by his head to be “charming.” Amused, King George opined that Washington might feel differently if more bullets had been fired at him. During the Revolutionary War, Washington’s crossing of the icy Delaware River with his troops after dark on Christmas Eve in 1776 was a remarkably audacious, successful attack on the British.

“Leadership Lesson 5 – A Leader Has Self-Control”

George Washington possessed an explosive temper, but he seldom lost emotional control in front of others. As president, Washington was careful not to exhibit anger when Thomas Jefferson, his secretary of state, proved personally disloyal. He did not like the press but he never entered into negative discourse with its individual members. Indeed, Washington always strove to remain above the fray and, therefore, became highly respected.

“Leadership Lesson 6 – A Leader Takes Personal Responsibility”

In 1776, Washington agreed to assume command of the Continental Army. In doing so, he risked everything – his life, wealth, land and family. Washington knew that he and his soldiers faced a grim, uphill fight all the way. Britain’s military was then the strongest army in the world. The Continentals, on the other hand, were a ragtag bunch with few supplies, little training and scant munitions. But Washington did not shirk from the difficult – some would say impossible – task before him. He laid everything on the line.

“Leadership Lesson 7 – A Leader Is Determined”

Often during the Revolutionary War, the Americans seemed certain to be defeated by the mighty British. Many influential Continentals were ready to give up the fight – but not Washington. His steely resolve proved immensely inspirational to his troops. His brilliant Christmas Eve foray proved successful. But prior to the operation, many of his commanders considered it nothing less than a suicide mission. The weather was horrible. The river was awash with treacherous ice. Furthermore, the Continental Army’s soldiers were a sorry lot; many even lacked boots or shoes. Washington refused to be defeated by these difficult circumstances. His successful attack against Hessian mercenaries in Trenton, New Jersey, the next morning proved to be a major turning point in the war.

“Leadership Lesson 8 – A Leader Has a Strong Work Ethic”

Washington was an exceptionally hard worker his entire life. As a gentleman farmer, he would rise around four in the morning to ride his horse across his 8,000 acres to oversee his workers and their operations. Washington never took a day off from the conflict during the Revolutionary War. He was always at the side of his troops. As president, Washington sometimes suffered illness, but steadfastly refused to retire to a sick bed.

“Leadership Lesson 9 – A Leader Uses Good Judgment”

In 1777, the Second Continental Congress appointed the Marquis de Lafayette, a 19-year-old French nobleman, as a general in the Continental Army. Many seasoned battle officers resented this appointment. But Washington understood that French assistance was vital to the fight for independence. Plus, Washington was greatly impressed with young Lafayette and went out of his way to show his support. This turned out to be a highly judicious move. French help proved invaluable during the war against the British. Washington showed similar good judgment as president, particularly in terms of the brilliant men that he brought into his cabinet, including Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton.

“Leadership Lesson 10 – A Leader Learns From Mistakes”

In 1776, the second year of the Revolutionary War, Washington made numerous costly mistakes as a military strategist and leader. But he always kept his chin up and soldiered ahead. Just as important, Washington always worked hard to learn as much as he could from his mistakes and errors in judgment. This was his lifelong habit.

“Very few people perceive of Washington as the creative, big-thinking, inspiring visionary leader he actually was.”

As a young officer in the British Army during the French and Indian War, Washington learned that commanding supposedly impregnable forts and their surrounding environs was not always a sure recipe for victory. He put this insight to work during the Revolutionary War. At the time, the British were in charge of most large American cities and held large swaths of territory throughout the colonies. But as long as the British could not defeat Washington’s troops, the Continental Army still had a chance. Thus, Washington became a master at keeping his army on the move and avoiding major defeat at the hands of the British. Basically, Washington always outfoxed the British. His clever strategy eventually proved victorious.

“Leadership Lesson 11 – A Leader Is Humble”

Even as a military leader and as America’s first president, Washington was always a humble man who was in close touch with his own shortcomings. He wrote his wife Martha during the Revolutionary War that he was deeply worried he might not be up to his heavy responsibilities as the leader of the Continental Army. He reluctantly agreed to become America’s first president, and always considered himself to be fully “dispensable” as a leader. Washington sneaked into his inaugural ball early to avoid the pomp and ceremony

of a lofty entrance. When he finally retired from the presidency, Washington stated that his judgment as president was always “very fallible.”

“Leadership Lesson 12 – A Leader Does the Research and Development”

Although he was not well-educated, Washington hungered for reliable, useful information of all kinds. As a farmer and animal breeder, he conducted his own research to improve his operations. He devised and continually refined a carefully organized system for rotating his crops. He also invented a special seeding apparatus that enabled the men who tilled his fields to plow and place seeds in a single operation. As commander of the Continental Army, Washington ordered medical personnel to inoculate his troops for smallpox. This enabled many continental soldiers to avoid being stricken by this highly contagious disease. Indeed, historian Joseph Ellis believes that Washington’s move to inoculate his troops was his most brilliant military decision.

“Leadership Lesson 13 – A Leader Values Presentation”

Although Washington was modest, he fully understood the power of a strong, attractive presentation. In fact, he developed the designs for some of his own military uniforms. Washington dressed well and he did become a masterful dancer. At every social function, a long line of women waited to dance with him. After the defeat of the British at Yorktown – the battle that decided the Revolutionary War – Washington refused to accept the sword of a deputy officer of General Cornwallis, the top British commander. Washington, who well-understood the importance of symbolic gestures, ordered one of his own deputy commanders, General Benjamin Lincoln, to accept the sword instead.

“Leadership Lesson 14 – A Leader Exceeds Expectations”

As a military leader and as the first American president, Washington never promised what he could not deliver. When he became commander of the Continental Army, he did not pledge glorious victory. Indeed, he told his wife that he had written his will. Washington did not shirk his grave responsibilities. He possessed a strong determination to succeed at all costs, but he never created false hopes among the troops he led into battle. Thus, when they were victorious, whether in a great battle or small, his soldiers could take joy in their accomplishments.

“Leadership Lesson 15 – A Leader Has Heartfelt Faith”

In terms of his religious beliefs, historians consider Washington a deist, someone who believes in a divine being that is not involved in creation. Nevertheless, Washington’s faith in what he termed “Providence” was all-abiding. In 1783, he wrote that his countrymen should thank the “Supreme Ruler of the Universe” for “rescuing” America. It is commonly believed that Washington himself decided to add the phrase “So help me God” to the oath of office he took when he was sworn in as the first president. Nevertheless, Washington was a strong proponent of religious freedom, a basic principle he advocated time and again.

“The Rules of Civility”

As a boy, Washington carefully studied a book entitled *Youths Behavior, or Decency in Conversation Amongst Men*. The content was based on an early Jesuit text covering 110 separate rules of civility. The book dealt with such subjects as honor, respect, dignity and courteous behavior. Washington inculcated the book’s precepts into his everyday life. Indeed, its creed helped Washington develop his strong character.

“George Washington, Entrepreneur”

Washington is known as a bold general, a clever strategist and an inspiring leader. But his keen business acumen and tremendous entrepreneurial skills are less famous. For example, even as a very young man, Washington understood the great value of real estate. By the time of his death, he owned “70,000 acres of land in what would today be seven different states.” Washington was also a dedicated farmer who spent a great deal of time and attention discovering the best way to increase crop yields. He was famous throughout Virginia as an animal breeder; in fact, he was one of the most successful mule breeders in the nation. Besides being a landowner and farmer, Washington dabbled in other moneymaking ventures, including a gristmill, a distilling business and a fishing enterprise that harvested a million and a half herring in less than two months.

About the Authors

James C. Rees is the executive director of Mount Vernon, George Washington’s home, which is now a museum. Prolific author **Stephen Spignesi** writes often on history and popular culture.



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