

# Eight Laws of Heroic Leadership

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From former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich to Bernard Madoff, the integrity of America's leadership structure appears to be waning. However, William A. Cohen, a former major general in the U.S. Air Force Reserve and author of *Heroic Leadership: Leading With Integrity and Honor*, said organizational leaders can, and should, look to the armed forces for direction. After conducting some 200 interviews with military leaders and drawing from principles developed over 7,000 years of organized conflict, he has identified eight universal laws of heroic leadership that define great leaders.

- 1. Maintain absolute integrity.** Whether a general in the army or CEO of a multibillion-dollar company, maintain an open, honest and principled approach to leadership. Mistakes are inevitable, but remaining just and ethical will elicit the continued respect of one's workforce. "Don't say things and then go back on your word; speak straight to your guys," Cohen said.
- 2. Know your stuff.** In the ultracompetitive world of modern business, office politics can take center stage in the drive to get ahead in an organization. However, there is still no substitute for knowing your stuff. As a college dropout, Bill Gates took his computer programming expertise and developed a \$58 billion enterprise. Being an expert, learning from every experience and understanding the employees you represent will ensure long-term support.
- 3. Declare your expectations.** From executing military operations to implementing global mobility strategy, declaring a set of clear and rationalized expectations will inspire a team to succeed. The ascendancy of President Obama pays testament to the importance of communicating a structured and compelling game plan to motivate people.
- 4. Show uncommon commitment.** Extraordinary commitment is contagious. If a leader is steely and determined, his or her goals will seem worth fighting for. It took Irwin Jacobs, chairman of Qualcomm, almost a decade of perseverance to make the company's first major sales breakthrough. He has since grown the business into a Fortune 100 company.
- 5. Expect positive results.** "If you think you won't be successful, you won't be — I guarantee it," Cohen said. In 1987, salon chain Supercuts was facing bankruptcy. Buoyed by new CEO Betsy Burton's relentlessly positive expectations for the company, franchisees, employees and management rallied, and within 16 months profits were up by 10 percent. If leaders expect positive results, others will expect them, too.
- 6. Take care of your people.** Accepting the mantle of responsibility when things go awry shows a willingness to put others' needs first. Leaders who look after their people can invariably expect them to do the same.
- 7. Put duty before self.** A leader who focuses on duty and puts the mission and team before his or her own concerns will provide an example for others to follow. In the late 1980s, Ken Iverson, CEO of steel manufacturer Nucor Corp., was feeling the pinch of a failing industry. Instead of downsizing, he enacted pay cuts, including a 75 percent reduction in his own annual salary. Nucor recovered and enjoyed consistently high profits into the late 1990s without cutting its workforce. Sharing in the bad times as well as the good is part of a leader's duty to be a selfless role model.
- 8. Get out in front.** When Napoleon Bonaparte advised commanders to "march to the sound of guns," he outlined a leadership principle that is still relevant some 250 years later. Leaders who get into the thick of things, set an example and are willing to do anything they would ask their people to do will educe trust and enthusiasm from their workers.

Management thinker Peter F. Drucker said, "The Army trains and develops more leaders than do all other institutions together." In the pressure cooker environment of corporate America, strong leadership demands strong values. Following the eight principles of heroic leadership can help all leaders be all they can be. **TM**