



## *Lessons from a Leader of Leaders*

*What to look for when considering elevating others to leadership*

Tim Stevenson

**ONE WEEK AFTER** the attack on Pearl Harbor, Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower arrived in Washington, D.C. He went immediately to the War Department offices (the Pentagon was still under construction) to present himself to his new superior: Chief of Staff of the United States Army, General George C. Marshall.

I've long been interested in Dwight Eisenhower as an example of excellent leadership. He and General Douglas MacArthur are the two World War II military leaders probably best known to the public today.

Marshall's name seems to have receded through the years, but his impact was huge.

Besides overseeing the war effort and serving as Secretary of State, he devised and supervised the European Recovery Program to help the continent rebuild from the war's devastation. It was President Truman who insisted it be called "The Marshall Plan" in honor of its architect, and it was amazingly successful. For these post-war services, Marshall was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953.

I recently read an excellent biography of Eisenhower by Stephen E. Ambrose, and was surprised to discover how great an impact Marshall had on Eisenhower's development as a leader. **One of the most important responsibilities of a leader is the development and selection of other leaders.** Marshall had clear views on this subject which influenced Eisenhower, and are worth careful consideration today.

### **Responsibility and Initiative**

I can only imagine what it felt like to be a military leader in the first days after Pearl Harbor. There was an emergency need for strategy and a massive build up. Marshall had



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to find capable officers and quickly. That first day he tested Eisenhower thoroughly with questions to learn whether he was capable of sound analysis and strategizing. Marshall decided he was, and put Ike in charge of the Philippines and Far Eastern Section of the War Plans Division. He then closed their *first day* with this charge:

**“Eisenhower, the Department is filled with able men who analyze their problems well but feel compelled always to bring them to me for final solution. I must have assistants who will solve their own problems and tell me later what they have done.”**

What label would you put on that description? Two words that come to my mind are responsibility and initiative.

- **Responsibility.** Marshall did not want good analyzers who refused to own responsibility. Critics and Monday Morning Quarterbacks (those who confidently tell you what you “should have done” after the fact) are a dime a dozen. **The person who will step up and own a problem, take action, and bear responsibility for the results is a leader.**
- **Initiative.** Defined, this is “the action of taking the first step or move; responsibility for beginning or originating; the ability to think and act without being urged.” The last thing Marshall needed at that critical hour was dependent subordinates. There was too much to be done, and it had to be done *now*. He needed **resourceful leaders who could think and act on their own.** They must also be confident and courageous enough to bring their reports and bear valid criticism of their decisions.

Marshall found these exact qualities in Eisenhower, and the two built an effective and close working relationship.

As an application, consider what *you* want to see in key subordinates. By “key” I mean

those who can potentially take on greater responsibility or even share the burden of leading. **One of the greatest pitfalls a leader can fall into is the desire to keep subordinates dependent upon them.** For a team or organization to approach its potential, you need people who are growing in self-sufficiency, responsibility, and initiative.

## Qualifiers and disqualifiers

Marshall had to grow the military to over 8,000,000 soldiers by 1942, a fortyfold increase from three years earlier. Ambrose writes (emphasis mine),

**Marshall needed a stupendous organization. To do so effectively he needed assistants he could trust. In picking them, he took professional competence for granted and concentrated on personality traits.**

Too often, competence alone is considered when people are given leadership positions. It is assumed that someone who is a good *doer* because of their great work ethic will also be successful as a *leader*. It doesn’t follow.

Marshall didn’t make that mistake. He looked not only for competence in a person’s work; he looked for the particular traits that would make them successful in leadership.

Marshall also watched for *negative* traits that served as **disqualifiers**. He believed the following traits made a person unsuitable for command (quotes from Ambrose):

1. **“Foremost among these were those who were self-seeking in the matter of promotion.”**

The “foremost” disqualifying trait was looking out for Number One instead of commitment to the success of the mission. Individuals like this are identified quickly by peers and subordinates, and they lose credibility, which is the currency of leadership.

**2. “Next came those who always tried to ‘pass the buck.’”**

I’ve seen it and I’m sure you have, too: The person who is never responsible for anything that goes wrong. They don’t carry their weight and, again, any credibility they have drains rapidly away.

**3. “Officers who tried to do everything themselves and consequently got bogged down in detail were equally unsatisfactory.”**

This comment will probably surprise the dedicated doers among us. It is vital to remember that **as a leader, your effectiveness is not determined by how much you do, but by how much gets done because of what you do.** No organization can afford to be bogged down by leaders who want to do everything themselves.

**4. “Men who shouted or pounded on the desk were as unacceptable to Marshall as men who had too great a love of limelight.”**

This comment cuts against the military stereotype: A superior officer dressing down a subordinate in the loudest possible volume with language laced with four-letter words. The greatest leaders tend to be otherwise. Marshall believed that such behavior marks the person as egocentric. In our terms, out-of-control behavior by a leader is a way of proclaiming, “It’s all about me!” Effective leaders remember that it’s all about the mission.

**5. “Nor could he abide the pessimist.”**

Regular readers of *Leading Insights* will know my response to this one. I believe it is

truly *impossible* to be a leader of men and women if you tend to think pessimistically. A leadership attitude is always an *optimistic* one.

## Conclusions

Ambrose concludes this section with these comments:

**He [Marshall] surrounded himself with men who were offensive-minded and who concentrated on the possibilities rather than the difficulties.**

**In every respect, Eisenhower was exactly the sort of officer Marshall was looking for. Eisenhower himself, as Supreme Commander and later as President, used Marshall’s criteria in picking his subordinates.**

When we look to role models, we sometimes only consider what they *have become* and forget to ask *how they got that way*. No one emerges from birth as a great leader of people. Yes, we have varying natural gifts, but mostly leaders are molded by the choices that built their character ... and invariably also by the influence of other leaders.

By dedicating yourself to developing other leaders, you will truly multiply your influence. Marshall’s criteria for selecting leaders are excellent points we can use both for self-examination and for identifying others who have leadership potential. 