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Learning from a Selfless Leader

Modern commanders-in-chief can find inspiration in Roosevelt's devotion to those who served under him

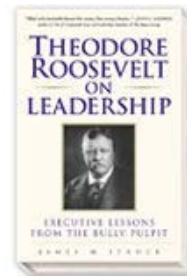
In Theodore Roosevelt on Leadership (April, 2001, Prima Publishing), author James M. Strock examines the leadership qualities that characterized Roosevelt throughout his life and that can guide business leaders today. In this adapted excerpt, Strock looks at how Roosevelt got the best out of his team:

No leader walks alone. A chief executive adds value by eliciting outstanding team performance. A superbly functioning group can accomplish far more than can be foreseen by adding the sum of its parts.

Roosevelt was an extraordinary team leader. He repeatedly lifted group morale and performance to new heights -- as president of the New York City Police Board, assistant secretary of the navy, colonel of the Rough Riders, governor of New York, president of the United States, and head of an insurgent political movement, as well as on numerous hunting and exploring adventures.

TR frequently framed management issues in martial terms. His experience in the civilian and active-duty components of the military -- looking from the bottom up as well as the top down -- was a school for making large organizations operate effectively, including corporate and public bureaucracies today.

His four months of active duty as commander of a regiment included many of the same challenges rediscovered in start-up companies in the twenty-first century's New Economy: selecting and motivating team members, training them as a unit, imparting a unifying vision while encouraging individual initiative, recognizing and rewarding performance in the field as more significant than pre-existing rank or credentials, and ultimately disbanding the team and maintaining it as an ongoing network. The Rough Riders were guided by few rules and fewer certainties; time moved with remorseless rapidity. The stakes were far greater -- and the consequences more final -- than in the most unforgiving business



James Strock's new book about a model leader

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environment. Roosevelt's team faced and fired real bullets.

Among the key elements of TR's approach to leading his team:

The welfare of your team is your overarching responsibility. The cornerstone of TR's success as a team leader was that he consistently placed the welfare of the group ahead of his own. Perhaps this is best encapsulated in a single statistic. As Roosevelt repeatedly emphasized in *The Rough Riders*, "In my regiment, as in the whole cavalry division, the proportion of loss in killed and wounded was considerably greater among the officers than among the troopers, and this was exactly as it should be."

Throughout the brief Spanish-American War, TR reliably took the perspective of the troops for whom he was responsible. He declined the offer of the top command of a regiment in favor of a more experienced officer. He butted heads with the bureaucracy to assure that his troops would be outfitted with summer clothing. He twisted arms to make certain they were equipped with smokeless rather than outdated black-powder rifles. He demanded decent food for them and was prepared to purchase it himself if necessary. He paid out of his own pocket to move the regiment to its port of embarkation for Cuba. As enemy batteries showered death on the Rough Riders, TR at once protected and inspired his team, remaining on horseback while they were on foot. After the close of the hostilities -- likely at the cost of the Medal of Honor he coveted -- he signed a public letter to the military brass, demanding immediate action to protect the troops from rampant malarial fever (at one point he reported to his sister Corinne that of approximately 400 men in his camp, 123 were in doctors' care, with the rest of the 600 he started with either dead or in rear hospitals). When his regiment returned to Long Island, Roosevelt declined the offer that would have allowed him -- but not those under his command -- to leave camp and visit his nearby home and family.

TR asserted: "[T]he best work can be got out of the men only if the officers endure the same hardships and face the same risks." Throughout his life -- beginning in the Badlands -- Roosevelt lived by the code he expressed shortly before his death: "No man has a right to ask or accept any service unless under changed conditions he would feel that he could keep his entire self-respect while rendering it." With few limitations on what he would give of himself, TR faced few limitations on what he could ask from others.

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