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Lessons from a Legendary Leader

A new book on Theodore Roosevelt suggests ways decision-makers can learn from the onetime President's exceptional leadership skills

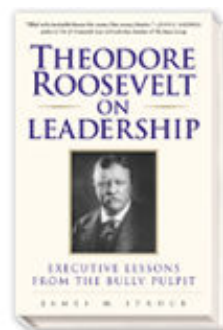
In Theodore Roosevelt on Leadership (April, 2001, Prima Publishing), author James M. Strock examines the leadership qualities that characterized Roosevelt throughout his life and how those same qualities can guide business leaders today. In this adapted excerpt, Strock details Roosevelt's penchant for taking action, even when doing so entailed risk:

Roosevelt's transparent directness fortified his negotiating stance in many situations, imparting the aura of the Big Stick. When circumstances imposed an indirect approach -- direct action was foreclosed -- Roosevelt would respond accordingly. A memorable example occurred in 1907.

TR's premature withdrawal from consideration for the 1908 presidential nomination, combined with the loss of congressional supporters in the 1906 midyear election, emboldened his adversaries. Among them was a group of Western congressmen, embittered by the president's unprecedented conservation policies, which removed or restricted millions of acres from private development. They passed an amendment to curtail the president's ability to set aside additional national reserves. Roosevelt found himself in a quandary. He felt compelled to sign the agriculture appropriation to which the dreaded amendment was attached (there was no option of a partial veto). He remained committed to major expansion of protected lands. The president had ten days in which to decide how to handle this troublesome legislation.

At the suggestion of Gifford Pinchot, his close ally and head of the Forest Service, Roosevelt decided he would sign the legislation -- after annexing an additional sixteen million acres of forest reserves.

Roosevelt later recalled, "The opponents of the Forest Service turned handsprings in their wrath; and dire were their threats against the Executive; but the threats could not be carried out, and were really only a tribute to the efficiency of our action."



James Strock's new book about a model leader

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From the comfortable distance of a century, hearing that congressmen "turned handsprings in their wrath" elicits a smile. Such things are far from us now. We know how things turned out, who was proved right, at least by our lights. But then it was different.

A leader who takes the initiative not only has the advantages of the first mover; he must also accept the likelihood of greater controversy and criticism. Roosevelt recognized this reality. He wrote in his *Autobiography*:

If I were on a sail boat, I should not ordinarily meddle with any of the gear; but if a sudden squall struck us, and the main sheet jammed, so that the boat threatened to capsize, I would unhesitatingly cut the main sheet, even though I were sure that the owner, no matter how grateful to me at the moment for having saved his life, would a few weeks later, when he had forgotten the danger and his fear, decide to sue me for the value of the cut rope. But I would feel hearty contempt for the owner who had so acted.

The leader must have confidence that he has served his enterprise well, even if, foreseeably, some will not in the short run -- if ever -- understand or praise actions done in their behalf.

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