



## What would Attila the Hun do?

*Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*, published 14 years ago, was a gimmick, says author Wess Roberts.

It has sold more than a million copies, is published in 24 languages and has spawned copycat books on figures ranging from Jesus to Martin Luther King Jr., all on leadership. The only thing that might slow the genre is an exhaustion of historical figures.



Attila the Hun

Roberts had spent a career studying leadership, but no one would have bought a book called *Leadership Secrets of Wess Roberts*, he said.

He was leaning toward Abraham Lincoln but chose Attila as his protagonist because so little is known about him that Roberts could give his own advice in the voice of an ancient warrior without any risk of it being challenged.

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#### The cast:

**Attila the Hun** played by Wess Roberts, author, *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun* .

**Churchill** played by Steven Hayward, author, *Churchill on Leadership: Executive Success in the Face of Adversity*.

**T. Roosevelt** played by James Strock, author, *Theodore Roosevelt on Leadership: Executive Lessons from the Bully Pulpit*.

**Patton** played by Alan Axelrod, author, *Patton on Leadership: Strategic Lessons for Corporate Warfare*.

**E. Roosevelt** played by Robin Gerber, author, *Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way : Timeless Strategies from the First Lady of Courage*.

Authors say the books attempt to split the difference between being practical and entertaining.

"They wouldn't keep publishing them if they didn't make money," says Steven Hayward, author of *Churchill on Leadership*.

He says readers like the books not only for inspiration, but also for a quick biography for those who don't want all the childhood details.

"Biographies aren't written with the purpose of drawing out lessons," Hayward says.

Donald Phillips, the mayor of Dallas suburb Fairview, has written *Lincoln on Leadership*, *The Founding Fathers on Leadership* and *Martin Luther King, Jr. on Leadership*. He says using historical figures makes the advice more memorable than what comes from the pens of living leadership gurus.

When Churchill gives advice, it's timeless. *Lincoln on Leadership* can be read today or in 10 years, Phillips says.

In these times of turmoil, both on the battlefield and in corporate offices, USA TODAY corporate management

reporter Del Jones asked five wartime leaders to weigh in with advice.

**Question: Are leaders born or made?**

**Patton:** I don't know, but I can assure you that no leader is truly effective unless he is 100% certain he was born to lead. Are some born with that certainty? Maybe. Can that certainty be learned? Absolutely.

**Churchill:** Both.

**Theodore Roosevelt:** Made. I was a pitiful specimen as a child, altogether deficient in respect of leadership. With my late, beloved father's guidance I set about to make my body, thereby making my mind and spirit as well. If I can do this, anyone can.

**Attila:** Everyone is born, but nobody is born a leader, except those unfortunates born into reigning monarchies whose limited gene pool is not always kind. The simple truth is that history reveals no leader who didn't learn to lead. Some possess more intelligence, which doesn't necessarily make them better leaders. Some have more stamina, courage and ambition, which only sometimes give them an edge over those having a smaller portion of these traits. Truth be told, we all know leaders whose stubborn tenacity, a behavior adopted when nothing else works, is the key to their success.



AP file  
**E. Roosevelt**

**Eleanor Roosevelt:** Made. Who would have predicted that I would have been able to overcome horrible shyness, a dysfunctional family that rivals your Osbournes and my husband's infidelity to lead the effort that created the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights?

**Q: How do you motivate people who aren't performing at their potential?**

**Patton:** Once, in Sicily, I told a general who was somewhat reluctant to attack that I had perfect confidence in him. To show it, I went home. Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.

**Attila:** Potential can't be accurately assessed, and cheerleading doesn't always work. When a Hun fails to meet expectations, the root problem generally rests in inadequate training or poor supervision.

**T. Roosevelt:** Reward those who are performing well and clear the way for promoting the superior performers. Making room for new growth means that you have to get rid of the old growth, the comfortable and the less productive. I hope that my own example of performing far beyond what might have been expected from my rather ordinary mental and physical gifts will inspire others to reach for the stars.

**E. Roosevelt:** Eliminate the fear of failure. It is certainly more interesting than holding off timidly, afraid to take a chance, afraid to fail.

**Q: How do you make a decision with less than perfect information?**

**Patton:** When a decision has to be made, make it. An imperfect plan based on limited knowledge is better than no plan at all. Don't let the best become the enemy of the good.

**Churchill:** Assume that the favorable and adverse chances equate, and then eliminate them both from the calculation. Take refuge beneath the impenetrable arch of probability.

**Attila:** Perfect information wouldn't guarantee a perfect decision. The best decision is the most prudent of the logical alternatives. When the consequences are too grim to bear, I choose the next best course of action.

**E. Roosevelt:** The act of making a decision is a human endeavor and as such will never be perfect. We must follow our instincts, draw on experience and move forward.

**T. Roosevelt:** A leader almost always has less than perfect information. That is one reason we look for courage in our leaders. To the extent one makes decisions with disinterestedness, thinking only of serving others, almost any decision will be handled as well as it might be even in adverse circumstances.

**Q: Leadership is easy when things go right. What does a great leader do when things**



National Archives  
T. Roosevelt

### go wrong, perhaps terribly wrong?

**Churchill:** Tell the truth to the people, even of hard and heavy tidings; they can take it. We should expect sudden turnings, but should not be taken by surprise. It is a mistake to look too far ahead; only one link in the chain of destiny can be handled at a time.

**Patton:** Always begin an operation with a Plan B in your drawer, and retain the flexibility to use it provided that you never relinquish your superiority. Always attack. Never surrender. Do not sacrifice steamroller momentum to self-doubt and second thoughts.

**Attila:** Leadership is never easy duty. When things go right, it is the result of hard work and effort. When things aren't going right, it can be factors beyond a leader's control. When the good takes a sudden turn for the worse, I identify what I can control and fight fiercely to turn fate's tide in the Huns' favor.

**T. Roosevelt:** Leaders fulfill their duty by enduring at least the same privation and risks as others. Leaders must demonstrate absolute, unshakable faith in the cause and in ultimate victory. They must show the greatest strength in those very areas where others are facing down fear and doubt. The best exemplar is Lincoln, whose Civil War leadership held the nation together against the most grave challenges and did so while enduring the slings and arrows of opponents ranging from the frivolous to the self-interested to those whose causes gave comfort to evil.

**E. Roosevelt:** When things go terribly wrong a leader must focus on core values and look ahead to the future. Try to imagine what matters years from now (and) the way out of the problem will become clear.

**Q: In the 21st century we have been hit by corporate scandals. Is the system in need of a major overhaul, or is this a matter of a few bad apples? What should be done?**

**T. Roosevelt:** Do not flinch from hitting those miscreants with all you've got. Their malfeasance endangers capitalism, and my friends on Wall Street should be in the forefront of making things right. Should they fail to take action, intemperate, ill-judged reforms may be the only recourse.

**E. Roosevelt:** The regulation of business favored by my uncle Theodore Roosevelt and my husband has collapsed, and what has followed is unrestrained corporate greed on the part of more than a few bad apples. It is up to government to ensure political and economic democracy and expand our faith in democratic capitalism.

**Q: How would you deal with a whistle-blower in your ranks?**

**Patton:** I'd pin a medal on him.



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Churchill

**Churchill:** I would praise him and promote him.

**T. Roosevelt:** Those who are insubordinate in service of principle may well be exhibiting leadership qualities, risking themselves for others. I blew the whistle on armchair generals whose mistakes threatened the lives of my Rough Riders in Cuba, and I admire others who do the same.

**Attila:** Huns who confidentially report wrongs earn my admiration because they allow me the opportunity to right wrongs best corrected, not covered up, in private before they become the stuff of a scandal. Huns who take wrongs public complicate my ability to fix the problem, which earns them villain status.

**T. Roosevelt:** If someone blew the whistle, I would promote them as a potential leader and offer them as an example to others. None of this applies, of course, to the conniving individual who would cloak insubordination with a mendacious claim to be a whistle-blower.

**E. Roosevelt:** A whistle-blower is a person who points out the wrong that others can see but have chosen to ignore, or worse, condone. I admire such people and strive to have their courage myself. Every time we shirk

making up our minds or taking action we weaken our character and our ability to be fearless.

**Q: Can compassion get in the way of results? How should a CEO balance layoffs that would make a company more financially sound?**



AP file

**Patton**

**Patton:** Where's the compassion in letting surplus workers kill your company? A dead company benefits no one, not shareholders and not labor. No guarantees. Not for shareholders. Not for labor. I might have slapped a face or two in my time, but my army went farther and faster than anyone's, and most of my people came out of it alive. Compassion for the dead doesn't mean a damn thing.

**Churchill:** I have always sought a middle course on these vexed social questions. A company must make a profit or it lets down its workers and shareholders. A system of unemployment insurance, which I helped found in Britain a hundred years ago, is necessary as a safety net, another phrase I coined.

**T. Roosevelt:** As Lincoln said, labor comes before capital. The best way for a corporate leader to protect capital is to protect labor. To do otherwise is to be shortsighted.

**Attila:** When corporate leaders' sole purpose is to enrich investors, they turn into prostitutes. It creates a precarious predicament the moment corporate leaders run out of people to fire just to tweak their profit statement. Laying people off should be the last, not first, option for reducing expenses.

**E. Roosevelt:** Corporate leaders must alleviate the human suffering of their workforce. They can do this with a commitment to people over profits and by developing the habit of working together with employees, realizing that what happens affects all.

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