

# Winston Churchill, a leader from history or an inspiration for the future?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *In a world where the need for effective leadership has never been greater this article aims to: demonstrate that Sir Winston Churchill exemplified key leadership principles; that these principles are still relevant today; that Churchill remains a source of inspiration throughout the world to leaders both in business and politics; and that these principles are all behavioral and can be learnt by others.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The key leadership principles are identified. For each principle an examination is made of Churchill's behavior and how he exemplified each principle. Examples are also given from modern-day leaders.*

**Findings** – *Churchill's leadership style demonstrates how his behaviour exemplifies key leadership principles which are still relevant today and can be used as a model for learning by others in order to become a more effective leader.*

**Originality/value** – *The paper is of value for anyone in any field that aspires to lead by demonstrating that leadership skills are about behaviour which can be learnt. The paper achieves this by examining the leadership principles Churchill exemplified showing how they are still relevant today.*

**Keywords** Leadership, Management skills, Communication skills, Modern history

**Paper type** Viewpoint

**S**ir Winston Churchill is acclaimed as one of the greatest leaders of all time and is probably the greatest example of someone who exemplifies key leadership principles but is there any relevance to Churchill's leadership in the twenty-first century? Churchill was a politician, not a CEO and it is 60 years since he led Britain in her "darkest hour". Furthermore his leadership was called upon in times of unprecedented war and conflict, so why Churchill and why now?

## The relevance of Churchill and leadership

Celia Sandys, Churchill's granddaughter and founder of Churchill Leadership Inc. believes that "the principles of my grandfather are as relevant today as they were 60 years ago . . . following September 11th, it was if Churchill stepped right out of the history books and back onto the international stage." The deluge of correspondence that Sandys received after 9/11 from President Bush, Prime Minister Blair, and Rudolph Giuliani convinced her of this. In his letter Giuliani wrote ". . . there is nothing more inspirational than the speeches and reflections of Winston Churchill . . ." It is not hard to find examples of modern-day leaders inspired by Churchill, either referring to him or directly quoting him. Equally there are many leaders who by their actions demonstrate that Churchill's example is a huge source of inspiration; the list might include Carly Fiorina, Michael Dell and Steve Jobs.

The necessity for good leadership in a demanding, rapidly changing world has never been greater. It may not be "the blitz" but leaders often feel 'blitzed' none the less. How do you motivate and inspire a confused and dejected workforce against a background of redundancy and restructuring? How do you become inspirational visionaries and beacons of

hope in a situation of expansion strategy when there is an urgent need to bring together disparate cultures? Churchill unquestionably communicated vision and encouraged innovation; he inspired a nation, perhaps the world, with his passion and determination. These qualities, which Churchill Leadership Inc. term “Churchillian Principles”, offer guidance on “how to” be a good leader. Churchill Leadership focuses on the individual and on behaviour, believing that by understanding “how to” adopt these principles it is possible to learn “how to” become a better leader.

### Key leadership principles

How did Churchill demonstrate these principles and how can they be learnt? Churchill was a visionary leader. Strong leadership is called upon most during a crisis, Churchill certainly faced the biggest crisis of his life in 1940. Consider a contemporary business scenario; a potential crisis where profits are down, a major downsizing is required, the bottom line looks grim, the shareholders are unhappy and the team is demoralised and fearful for their jobs. Change is probably required, but change can be painful, people generally resist change, especially when down spirited. Churchill’s approach would be firstly to explain the current realities, then inspire the team by offering them a vision for how things could be, then tell them how to achieve this and finally mobilize them into action. Churchill’s words show how he did this; he presented the current realities, “Against this loss of over 30,000 men” . . . then he offered a vision for a better future “. . . if all do their duty . . . if the best arrangements are made . . .” and showed how the vision could become a reality “. . . we shall go on to the end we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds we shall fight on the fields and in the streets we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender”. Patricia Russo, CEO of Lucent provides a contemporary visionary example:

While we must continue to focus on reducing our costs and expenses, now is the time to couple that effort with as intense a focus on driving top-line growth. It’s my intent that, as we come through this industry downturn, we’ll emerge stronger, leaner, more competitive and more customer-focused than we’ve ever been. . . . I see our services business being a far larger component than it is today . . . we intend to transform Lucent into the “network integrator” for phone companies (*Business Week* magazine, May 19, 2003).

To adopt a vision and embrace change people must be inspired. Churchill was a master at this, as one of his cabinet ministers, Leo Amery, commented: “No-one ever left his cabinet, meetings without feeling himself a braver man”. Churchill’s ability to inspire was not dependent just on his words but demonstrated by his behavior. He realised that to be effective with others, we need to be honest and realistic about our own abilities, to know when to offer advice but to never be too important to ask for help. Churchill showed his sincerity and interest in people and their ideas, he was empathetic and he knew how to listen. It won him people’s attention, respect and most importantly their commitment.

A leader needs to be a good communicator. Churchill achieved this by being very clear about the purpose of his communication, making sure he was aware of all the facts before he set the direction. His speeches always employed a very effective style; he would challenge the mind, touch the heart and then ask something of his audience “. . . the battle of France is over. I expect the battle of Britain is about to begin . . . let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, this was their finest hour.” Contrary to what many believe, Churchill was not a natural orator, he had a speech impediment and needed to practice each speech for many hours. Churchill was never pompous and his communications were unpretentious. Simple, but precise language made his speeches easy to understand. He is remembered for saying “short words are best and the old words when short are best of all”.

**“The necessity for good leadership in a demanding, rapidly changing world has never been greater.”**

Preparation, hard work and practice and a focus on clear language can help any leader succeed in better communicating his vision and direction.

Churchill knew his words needed to match his behavior; people follow behavior more than words. Having imparted the vision and given the direction he focused on the required action. He said “The only unpardonable sin is to sit back and accept the seemingly inevitable.” Similarly, Jack Welch of GE commented “the biggest mistakes that most CEOs make . . . they make plans but fail to execute them.” The action taken varies according to the situation. In certain circumstances a leader needs to have the courage and strength of conviction to make a decision and carry it through. Churchill would employ what he termed an “Action This Day” methodology, stamping these words on an order making it clear that it demanded immediate attention. He always tried to get the best performance out of the most people, revelling in people’s strengths, not their weaknesses, attempting to get each individual to be more productive, more focused and more fulfilled. Churchill achieved this by his receptiveness, his questioning and listening, recognising that he alone didn’t have all the answers, he knew that effective leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue. Furthermore, Churchill didn’t rely on reports from others but went out to find out for himself. After the Blitz he went on to the streets; in World War I he walked in the trenches, he stayed with the men and fought alongside them, finding out firsthand whether things were getting better or getting worse; whether his decisions were effective; identifying who was engaged and who wasn’t; where the morale was strong and where it was weak. If a leader equips himself with this self-knowledge by visiting the shop floor, the engineering department, the production line, the satellite offices, he gets to know his team, he gets to see who works where, who is inspired and achieving and who isn’t. By taking the time to be there, a leader gets to see where the culture is understood, whether things are improving and what a strong and vibrant workplace looks like.

Churchill said “Courage is rightly esteemed as the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others”. The true test of any leader is during times of challenge and controversy. The issues confronting Churchill could not have been more critical yet he demonstrated incredible courage and integrity both in his action and his words. He was always prepared to stand up for what he believed in, refusing to compromise over issues he knew to be right. He recognised that facing up to reality often meant confronting mistakes and he tried to prepare people for this. He believed that every decision can teach something, that the fear of failure only inhibits progress and that the only kind of failure that deserves to be punished is inaction. Churchill was prepared to learn from mistakes and was not afraid to admit when he was wrong. He demonstrated great forgiveness and magnanimity with others, never harboring grudges. He knew that his responsibility as a leader was to be genuine, someone whom others could look to and respect. In so doing he kept people calm and focused whilst still maintaining a sense of urgency to get the job done.

Innovation and change, although widely accepted in business today, are often resisted. Churchill exemplifies an innovative leader; he had an experimental mind-set and was known for his own innovative ideas. He said “No idea is so outlandish that it should not be considered with a searching but at the same time a steady eye” He sponsored the development of the tank, advocated Royal Naval Air Services, converted the navy’s fuel from coal to oil and created a new naval staff. When contemplating his biggest challenges he was prepared to take risks, embrace failure and stay involved. His principles for accepting change and being receptive to innovation are all behavioral and they can all be learnt. He looked for solutions by listening, questioning and following through in his actions. Churchill was receptive to accept and initiate change whilst not compromising his principles or purpose. Steve Balmer of Microsoft recently discussed the importance of innovation in the modern workplace:

. . . the bottom line for any company in our industry is that we have to meet customer expectations through a relentless focus on innovation. It’s the soul of our company and it’s what we aspire to more than anything else (“The technology industry at a crossroads”, The Churchill Club, Santa Clara, California, 09/15/03).

**“All leaders at some point have to engage with partners who are unwilling allies or even past competitors.”**

Along with Churchill's receptiveness and preparedness to listen to others was his realization of the need to build effective alliances. All leaders at some point have to engage with partners who are unwilling allies or even past competitors. Churchill's example shows how this can be done. He was always clear about why he needed to partner with someone, why the relationship was important, what the “win win” was. He stayed firm on critical issues and remained leveraged until he had established a relationship. He was positive and honest, delivering bad news quickly and staying in close communication. Most of all he was accessible. When Ebay's site kept crashing, Meg Whitman partnered with Scott McNealy of Sun Microsystems. McNealy commented: “Instead of making me angry she made me want to do just about anything we could to solve her problem. And that's what we did” (*Business Week*, May 29, 2005).

Great leadership requires great passion – perhaps the difference between a good leader and a great one isn't their expertise but their passion, probably the most single defining characteristic of a leader. Churchill had immense determination, exuding passion as well as purpose. Churchill showed his passion in many areas of his life, in the military, for his family and for his love of painting and books. In a recent article in the *Wharton Digest*, Adrienne M. Bigley, a Wharton MBA student, quotes Carly Fiorini “Leadership is about passion and ability.” Find your passion, love what you do.” Passion is infectious; if a leader has passion and shows determination, so will those who follow him. Churchill said “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never . . . in nothing great or small or petty never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense.” Churchill's passion fueled his determination and this inspired others.

### **Why Churchill?**

Why Churchill and why now? Churchill's leadership principles have proved both timeless and to be a continual source of inspiration to modern-day leaders, in both politics and business at a time when effective leadership has never been more essential. Churchill communicated vision with passion and determination, inspiring those he led by action and example with courage and integrity. His granddaughter Celia Sandys believes that it is possible for leaders today to develop their skills in leadership by focusing on their behavior and drawing upon Churchill's and other modern-day leaders' experiences of overcoming challenges and achieving success. It is small wonder that she is determined that Churchill Leadership Inc. will allow future generations of leaders to have the opportunity to learn from one of the greatest leaders of all time.