

Leadership vs. Power

What would George Washington do?

King George III asked Benjamin West, his American painter, what George Washington would do if he prevailed in the Revolutionary War. West replied, "He will return to his farm." The British monarch incredulously said, "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world." On December 23, 1783, Washington did just that and retired to Mount Vernon—despite the encouragement of many to stay in power. Despite the willingness of Americans to crown him king. Thirteen years later, he would do it once again.

In 1787, Washington was coaxed back to Philadelphia to attend the Constitutional Convention. While there, he provided the leadership necessary to get the fractious delegates to settle down and complete the work of designing a new constitution. Afterwards, in 1789, he was elected the first president of the United States. He reluctantly ran for a second term in 1792. He refused to run for a third term, setting a precedent that lasted 150 years, and retired once again to his farm.

Abraham Lincoln said, "If you want to test a man's character—give him power." George Washington passed that test. Twice in his life he walked away from power and proved that he was indeed the greatest man in the world. He demonstrated that leadership is something that you give—not take—and that power should be used responsibly.

Washington died in 1799, the year that Napoleon Bonaparte became the ruler of France. In contrast to Washington, Napoleon could not acquire enough power. His legendary lust for command drove him to take over much of Europe. "Power is my mistress," he once claimed, "I have worked too hard at her conquest to allow anyone to take her away from me." Years later, having lost all power and living in exile, he lamented, "They wanted me to be another Washington."

History is rife with stories of people who abused their power. Abuse of power, however, is not just reserved for politicians and tyrants. It can be abused by managers, spouses, parents, peers, and the list goes on. It is the lure of dominance over others, when it motivates people toward leadership roles, that is revealing. It reveals uncertainty, lack of confidence, and fear.

It is said that power corrupts, but more often than not, it is a corrupted individual who is attracted to power. It is a feeling of inferiority, sometimes called a Napoleon complex, that drives someone to control other people and to micromanage their surroundings. Today, we call such a person a control freak. Science fiction author Robert Heinlein noted, "Anyone who wants to be a politician shouldn't be allowed to be one."

When we look at Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human motivation (survival, safety, social, esteem, fulfillment), we see that someone who hungers for power is stuck in the second-to-bottom level: safety. A true leader has self-esteem and self-confidence and does not seek power to bolster his or her feeling of self-worth. Thomas Jefferson observed that, "An honest man can feel no pleasure in the exercise of power over his fellow citizens."

A true leader is motivated by a goal—a goal common to his group, whether that group is a company or a country. If you find yourself attracted to leadership, stop and check your motivation. Are you driven to share your gift of understanding in the endeavor of achieving a goal, or are you motivated by perquisites of the position and power you have over others? As John Quincy Adams said, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader."

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