

7 Leadership Lessons from the Life of Winston Churchill

By Marta Wilson, PhD

During the winter of 2001, the naval destroyer U.S.S. Winston Churchill will be commissioned. This tribute to one of history's greatest leaders inspired me, so I started reading about his life. One of my first discoveries about Churchill was his strong belief that he would contribute to the survival of civilization and the well-being of mankind. This personal vision was matched with a deep understanding of human nature.

Churchill cared about people, and he demonstrated this as he practiced management by walking around. As England's First Lord of the Admiralty from 1911 to 1915, he visited more ships and naval facilities than any First Lord before or since. Between 1911 and the outbreak of World War I, Churchill visited more than fifty ships as well as numerous harbor and shipyard sites.

Churchill made a habit of arranging interviews with junior officers and enlisted personnel. This was not always welcomed by top brass. It did, however, serve his purpose of gathering information. "He had a yarn with nearly all the lower deck men of the ship's company," the Daily Express newspaper wrote of a submarine visit in 1912, "asking why, wherefore, and how everything was done. All the sailors 'go the bundle' on him, because he makes no fuss and takes them by surprise. He is here, there, everywhere."

Disciplined habits, executive skills, and technical competence do not, in and of themselves, make a successful leader. Leadership also requires personal values that can serve as a lighthouse during turbulent times. Churchill's success was built on a foundation of such values that transcended the darkest of days.

In researching Churchill, I found strong overlap between his values and the work rules we have introduced within the U.S. Navy and many other organizations around the world. The work rules are:

- Use open, honest, and direct communication
- Create a supportive environment
- Maintain confidentiality with no attribution or retribution
- Stay focused and be prepared

- Hold a proper attitude
- Be self-monitoring
- Manage all agreements

Many people have found these rules to be self-evident and intuitive. They are based upon values that govern our effectiveness and growth. These values include learning, growing, and risk-taking; making a difference and experiencing joy when doing it; taking responsibility for self, relationships, and community; doing what is right and being accountable at the highest level; and looking for ways to align and attune human spirits and energies. Now, using the seven work rules as a framework, let's look at some examples of how Churchill applied his values and served as a beacon to others.

Use open, honest, direct communication

It was a mistake, Churchill often argued, "to shrink from stating the true facts to the public." When faced with mounting criticism about the poor progress of the war in early 1942, Churchill demanded a formal vote of confidence in the House of Commons to force the issue. "It is because things have gone badly, and worse is to come," he said, "that I demand a vote of confidence." Churchill prevailed, by a vote of 464 to 1.

Churchill also liked to deliver bad news personally, not only war news to the House of Commons, but to the Allies as well. One of the toughest moments of the war for him was when it became apparent that a second front against the Germans in France could not be opened up in 1943, as had been promised to Stalin. Churchill decided to go to Moscow to tell Stalin personally. "It was like taking a lump of ice to the North Pole," Churchill said.

Churchill communicated what he thought and felt to those he believed would benefit from his message. He was open and clear, as opposed to sending hidden messages. He offered his honest thoughts, ideas, and feelings. And, he shared his message with those it was intended for as opposed to telling someone who he hoped would pass it along.

Create a supportive environment

Churchill was extremely loyal and supportive of his colleagues and superiors. He was a genuine team player. Maurice Hankey, cabinet secretary during WWI, wrote later, “We owed a good deal in those early days to the courage and inspiration of Winston Churchill who, undaunted by difficulties and losses, set an infectious example to those of his colleagues who had given less thought than he, if indeed any thought at all, to war problems. His stout attitude did something to hearten his colleagues.”

During the 1930s, Churchill’s party leadership snubbed him and turned a scornful ear to his advice. Nonetheless, he campaigned vigorously on their behalf during general elections. Also, once a policy was set or a political quarrel decisively settled, Churchill would cease his opposition and get on board. After losing a long and bitter fight against the India dominion policy in the early 1930s, Churchill told one of his opponents, “you need not expect anything but silence or help from us.”

Maintain confidentiality with no attribution or retribution

Churchill weighed carefully the potential consequences of quoting other people and spreading gossip. He also guarded against attribution and retribution. He realized that attributing statements to others out of context could be misleading. He also knew that people who paid a price (received retribution) for what they did or said would hold back in the future and not be as valuable to him. Lord Bridges wrote after the war, “I cannot recollect a single Minister, serving officer, or civil servant who was removed from office because he stood up to Churchill and told Churchill that he thought his policy or proposals were wrong.”

Churchill was an exceptionally forgiving person. “I do not harbor malice,” he wrote in 1921, “I always forgive political attacks or ill-treatment not directed at private life.” This trait was most on display after World War II began. At that time, Churchill’s leadership position was invincible due to his clear and consistent warnings over the previous years. If anyone had a right to say, “I told you so,” and demand retribution against officials who had been against him, it was Churchill. But, he did no such thing.

In one instance, Churchill graciously accepted an apology from a Conservative Party official who had tried to remove him from Parliament just a few months before the outbreak of war. Churchill’s response was, “I certainly think that Englishmen ought to start fair with one another from the outset in so grievous a struggle, and so far as I am concerned, the past is dead.”

Stay focused and be prepared

Churchill was no stranger to stress — a problem faced by all leaders. His colleagues and friends marveled at how calm he was amid the most trying circumstances. While he had no silver-bullet solution, Churchill’s main method for dealing with stress and staying focused was never to be in a hurry. Churchill’s calmness amid commotion and crisis not only imparted confidence to his colleagues and subordinates, but was also the key to his enormous productivity.

Churchill thought that hastiness would dilute his concentration, disrupt his priorities, and make it impossible for him to follow a consistent method of work. Churchill’s tranquility and seeming leisure were closely related to his immense powers of concentration, and were in many ways the linchpin of his success. Churchill understood what it meant to be on purpose and remained there. He stayed on the issues and topics. For him, being prepared had many meanings, depending upon the situation. It included holding preparatory conversations, reviewing materials, and getting plenty of rest.

Hold a proper attitude

Optimism is key to the “can-do” attitude essential to successful leadership. But, most organizations are subject to an inertia that results in an “it-can’t-be-done” attitude. This was always unacceptable to Churchill. “Churchill’s supreme talent,” one of his aides recalled, “was in goading people into giving up their cherished reasons for not doing anything at all.” When apprised of delays in shipbuilding in 1939, for example, Churchill sent a memorandum to one of his senior administrators: “It is no use the contractors saying it cannot be done. I have seen it done when full pressure is applied, and every resource and contrivance utilized.”

“I am one of those,” Churchill remarked in 1910, “who believe that the world is going to get better and better.” He deplored negative thinking. In a speech to his officers in the trenches in France in 1916, Churchill exhorted, “Laugh a little, and teach your men to laugh. If you can’t smile, grin. If you can’t grin, keep out of the way till you can.”

“All will come right,” was one of Churchill’s favorite phrases. He repeated it often in the darkest days of World War II, and he seldom ended a wartime speech without a ringing note of optimism, usually drawn from an English poet. He ended one speech with a lyric from Arthur Hugh Clough, “But westward, look, the land is bright!”

Be self monitoring

An important part of Churchill’s success was his self-criticism. “Every night,” he remarked to one of his aides, “I try myself by court martial to see if I have done anything effective during the day. I don’t mean just pawing the ground,

anyone can go through the motions, but something really effective.”

In addition, Churchill sought feedback and advice from his colleagues and subordinates. One of his aides at the Treasury in the 1920s said of Churchill, “He always took criticism very, very meekly. One could say exactly what one liked in the way of criticism. He wanted the full critical value from subordinates.” On his first day back at the Admiralty in 1939, Churchill sent his initial thoughts to the senior staff with the concluding wish, “The First Lord submits these notes to his naval colleagues for consideration, for criticism and correction, and hopes to receive proposals for action in the sense desired.”

Manage all agreements

Churchill’s cumulative record of agreements forms the essence of how we remember him. He got clear on his commitments and worked to keep the ones that he made. Churchill’s ability to manage agreements touched every aspect of British domestic and foreign policy, from the struggle for social reform before World War I to the search for a summit conference after World War II. He worked to manage Britain’s relations with France, Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union, each at their most testing time. His finest hour was the leadership of Britain when it was most isolated, most threatened, and most weak—when his own courage, determination, and belief in democracy galvanized the nation.

Conscious choices

In the space provided below, take a moment and list one thing you can do in order to be more effective in upholding each of the seven work rules—

Work Rule	One thing I can do
1. Be open, honest, & direct	
2. Be supportive	
3. Maintain confidentiality	
4. Focus and prepare	
5. Hold a proper attitude	
6. Self monitor	
7. Manage all agreements	

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