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The Twelve Principles of Personal Leadership

Principle #10 – Know Thyself

-One Leader's Perspective

By Greg L. Thomas



An ancient text states that “the human mind is the most deceitful of all things. No one can understand how deceitful it is.” Within each of us lies a tremendous power that has the ability to produce great goodness or great evil. We are all capable of either, or both of these traits, and if you look at the history of mankind’s many leaders, this becomes clearly evident. Some historical leaders were caring and generous people. They gave of themselves to serve, nurture and mentor others. It was their goal lift up certain groups or nations to become better and more prosperous. Yet, other historical leaders have been the exact opposite. They were hard and selfish people. They ruthlessly took what they could from others. It was their goal to seize everything they could from certain groups or nations, often including their own. They greedily desired to control others without caring what would happen to them. People were simply something to be used for their personal gain.

Most historical leaders have been a *mixture* of good and bad qualities. We are reminded in the biblical creation story that the first man and woman took fruit from the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil. This symbolically means that the entire *human* race, including us... is a complex mixture of “good and evil” thoughts, attitudes and motives.

How well do you know your *own* heart and what you are capable of? In ancient Greece the aphorism “know yourself” was inscribed in the forecourt of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. This succinct statement should prod us to think about the *human* nature we struggle with on a daily basis. As just mentioned, this human nature is a *mixture* of good and evil. It influences our own morals, judgments, temperament, habits and the ability to control ourselves when necessary. Let’s begin to examine some important ways we can begin to *know thyself*.

First, how well do you take criticism or correction? Most of us bristle when we are criticized by others. Our natural reaction is “who do you think you are!” Often, we respond by looking for faults in our accuser to neutralize what has been said about us. But a better and more honest approach was demonstrated by the example of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln. One of the prominent members of Lincoln’s cabinet was a talented man named Edwin Stanton. As Lincoln’s Secretary of War, he shared the daily burdens of conducting the American Civil War

with the President. One day he became very frustrated with Lincoln and others heard him call Lincoln a “fool”. Of course, this comment got back to Lincoln and his response tells us a lot about his character. He replied, “Well, Stanton is a wise man, if he called me a fool, I had better look into it.” I thought of this story recently when I saw a young and highly successful televangelist interviewed on national television. He was asked pointedly how he responds to personal criticism about the focus of his preaching. The question was asked by the reporter in an accusatory tone that bordered on being rude. His reply was, “The first thing I do is look at *myself* and see if it is true, or if I am doing something to give that *impression*.”

The way to make harsh judgment serve a good purpose is to be humble enough to learn from it. It is a great person indeed who searches through even the most severe criticism to discover *any* element of truth. In contrast, most people simply dismiss anything they hear that is unpleasant or immediately get defensive with counter charges of criticism. However, we need to *know thyself* enough to not only recognize our faults and weaknesses but also the *impression* we leave with other people. There is a common saying today that *perception is reality*. For example, if we have a negative habit or a personality trait that gives the impression of us being selfish, or arrogant or uncaring we need to be aware of it. Once we are aware of it we can do things to *soften* that impression. We can't easily change our personality but perhaps we can smile more, ask people more questions to show we are interested in them, or make a greater effort to help others when we see a need.

Like many things, listening to criticism requires balance. Some individuals will criticize you for the simple reason they are jealous of you. We must be open-minded enough to accept criticism and learn from it but we must never allow our critics to stop us from pursuing a worthy goal. We can often learn more about ourselves from our enemies than we do our friends, but we should always hold on to a matter of *conscience* when challenged. Criticism should be viewed as a legitimate reason to pause, reflect, and discover how we can become better than we are. This opportunity for personal growth should be welcomed, but it should never cause us to abandon a beneficial goal or mission. Virtually all of the great leaders in human history had personal problems and flaws. If people waited for perfection to lead we would still be living in the Stone Age! Never allow criticism or a personal flaw to stop you from achieving something great.

A few years ago I read an interesting story about Dr. Martin Luther King. He was reputedly addressing a religious congregation about the need for their support of civil rights activism in their own community. Many members of the audience had serious concerns and expressed why they should *not* get involved. One individual stated, “we may be recognized and lose our jobs”. Another commented that the “police may become violent and we may get hurt”. Others in the audience also passionately expressed reasons why getting involved might result in pain, frustration or even possible death. After listening to these concerns for a while and attempting to respond to them as they arose, Dr. King seemingly exasperated with some in the audience loudly proclaimed, “if we are not willing to die for *something*, we are not *fit* to live!” By his own personal example Martin Luther King was willing to die for the principles he believed in, and he did. Do you *know thyself* well enough to be willing to sacrifice your wealth, career, or even your life for a worthy mission? We ask military personnel who protect us to do this everyday!

Thankfully, as leaders we are seldom required or asked to literally die for the causes we believe in or the changes we desire to see. Outside of the military, leaders are rarely expected to make the ultimate sacrifice. So for most of us the question we need to ask ourselves is “what am I willing to *live* for?” Values worth dying for are also worth living for!

Many years ago I watched an old Hollywood movie that re-enacted the events of the American Civil War. In one scene President Lincoln called a young man into his office to discuss his enlistment in the intelligence efforts of the Union army. Lincoln was probing the man to see if he had the qualities to become a good spy. As the men were talking, Lincoln asked him, "Jim, how much do you love your country?" Jim responded by saying, "Mr. President, I reckon I would be willing to die for her." Lincoln promptly spoke and replied, "Jim, I can find 10,000 men who are willing to *die* for the Union, I want you to *live* for her!"

As a leader, have you taken the time to determine just what things are worth living for? Do you *know thyself* enough to easily explain them to others without hesitation? Do they inspire you and add a sense of purpose to your life? One of the items at the very top of your list should be the value of integrity. What are you willing to personally *sacrifice* in order to maintain your integrity and not "sell out" when pressure is put on you to conform to others?

No amount of physical possessions including wealth, fame or power is a substitute for integrity. Why is integrity so important? The answer is rather simple. Wealth, fame and power are fleeting and typically unfulfilling. Once attained, or even partially attained, the need is for *more and more* to satisfy. Meanwhile, if one has sacrificed their integrity to achieve these things, eventually the only thing remaining is the dishonor of compromise and nothing of lasting value. In contrast, those who live by the principles they know are honorable and right, live with integrity. They remain content and fulfilled regardless of their financial or social circumstances. Their greatest possession is inner peace, personal contentment and self-respect. Their integrity influences and inspires people for many generations to come. They leave a legacy of genuineness behind them, and in front of them. Just think of the two examples alone I have mentioned in this chapter. Neither Lincoln nor Dr. King acquired great wealth in their lifetimes and both probably had more people who *despised* them, than admired them in their lifetimes. Yet their leadership and integrity has motivated and inspired people for generations. They knew where they were grounded. Do you *know thyself*?

What has become known as the *Titanic Disaster* was one of the worst maritime disasters in history. The British luxury liner named the Titanic was built by the White Star Line and weighted 46,000 gross tons. The ship had been dubbed unsinkable by many experts because of its unique design comprising of 16 watertight compartments or bulkheads. It also had a double-walled steel hull to give it additional protection in case the ship struck another object. Its maiden voyage in 1912 was to be from Southampton, England to New York City. On just the 5th day of her maiden journey, just around 11:40 PM on April 12th the mighty ship struck an iceberg about 95 miles south of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland.

It was a huge tragedy that many historians believe actually accelerated the decline of the British empire because of the loss of talented British leaders from all walks of life, who went down on the ship. Of the more than 2220 persons aboard, about 1507 died, including a few American millionaires like John Jacob Astor, Benjamin Guggenheim, and Isidor Straus. In spite of the Titanic being proclaimed unsinkable, the iceberg sufficiently damaged the ship to make it sink in less than three hours time. Later investigations found a number of *reasons* to explain why the disaster occurred. Here are some of them. The ship had been steaming too fast in dangerous icy waters. The lifeboat space provided room for only about half of the passengers and crew even though the Titanic had more lifeboats than were required by law at the time. As water poured in the front of the ship, and filled up one of the watertight bulkheads, it pulled the next bulkhead under the water line and it also filled. The water simply cascaded into the next bulkhead, then the next, until the ship filled with water. A nearby ship named the *Californian* was close to the scene but did not come to the rescue because its

radio operator was off duty and asleep. These are all valid reasons to explain the extent of the disaster but they do not explain *why* the double-walled steel hull failed when the ship hit an iceberg.

The events surrounding the sinking of the Titanic has been the subject of several films and books. However, it was not until September 1985 that the actual wreck was found resting under about 12,000 feet of water. The salvage crew was able to bring to the surface some of the steel from the hull of the ship and what they have discovered is startling!

Recent analysis has revealed that the steel hull of the Titanic had too high of a sulfur content. A high sulfur content causes steel to become more brittle as it gets colder. In the icy waters of the North Atlantic the Titanic's hull would break rather than bend if it hit another object. This is exactly what happened. It also had inferior rivets that were made poorly even by the standards of the day. The hull of the ship was held together by 3 million poorly made rivets. Surprisingly the total areas of the holes ripped open by the iceberg were only about the size of a modern refrigerator! Yet whole seams of rivets popped open when it hit the iceberg. A ship that had a mighty and impressive outward appearance was brought down by serious internal flaws.

There is a valuable lesson to learn from this example if we are humble enough to take the time to *know thyself*. In life there will be trials and temptations that test your metal! We also have internal weaknesses that can potentially bring us down. For some it is a lack of self-discipline, or an attraction to destructive things like drugs, promiscuous sex or toxic relationships. Realize that these kinds of flaws have destroyed many people including some with incredible gifts and potential. Don't let this happen to you. Know who and what you are. Know what you are capable of and avoid areas that will sink your life and your goals. Especially avoid those things to which you are personally *drawn* toward, and most *attracted* to. It only takes one *more* drink to become a drunk driver and end a life, only takes one accidental drug overdose to die, only takes one sexual escapade to acquire a lifelong disease and it only takes one large foolish purchase to cause severe financial problems.

In the Western world we use a phrase to describe the weakness in something. We say there is a "chink in the armor." A chink is a small crack or opening, and if one exists in armor plating it potentially can cause the protection of the armor to fail exposing the body to physical injury. Yes, you and I also have personal weaknesses that can lead to potential failure if we are not aware of them and guard against them. Other weaknesses that can lead to problems include unstable emotions, poor attitudes, ignorance, or excessive risk-taking. Vanity and an excessive ego has destroyed many people including some potential leaders just when they were on the threshold of achieving a great goal.

William Henry Harrison was the ninth president of the United States and served in 1841. He was one of the most controversial figures in the early westward expansion of the United States. As a military officer and later a Governor, he took millions of acres of land from Native Americans by military conquest or treaty. He was actually a wealthy planter and slave owner. But in an image cultivated by the marketing professionals of his day, he was elected to the Presidency as the legendary *Old Tippecanoe*, pictured as a rather *simple* man, a log cabin dweller and a drinker of hard cider.

Yet, he was the first president to die during his term of office, which lasted exactly one month. Harrison's term was the shortest in U.S. history. What happened to him can teach us valuable lesson about ourselves and risk-taking.

In March of 1841, the 68-year old President-elect Harrison journeyed to Washington in a triumphal procession. He was seen by many as the hero "Old Tip", as the campaign songs called him. His inauguration address was on March 4, 1841. He wrote his own inaugural address, and because his *age* was attacked during the campaign he felt it necessary to demonstrate his *manhood* on inauguration day. He gave the longest inaugural address in American history partly because he wanted to debunk campaign accusations that he was too old, and not smart enough to be president. It was almost 2 hours long, and on a very cold March day he refused to wear a coat or hat during his speech. He wanted to show himself as *macho* possessing vitality, vigor and physical strength. As a result of the frigid temperatures and minimal clothing, he developed a severe cold, that *grew* into pneumonia and he died only 31 days into his presidency!

Again, there is a good lesson to learn from this example if we are humble enough to take the time to *know thyself*. President Harrison thought he had something to prove. He allowed his ego to override common sense and it prematurely cost him his life just when he seemed to have arrived at a great goal. His vanity became a *chink in the armor* that brought him down. Are you motivated to "prove" something to others? I have a friend who spent most of his life trying to "prove" to his father that he had worth. He deeply desired his father's acceptance and affection. Yet, his father never gave it to his dying day. The question is why do we feel a need to prove something to others? Do you know thyself deeply enough to know your own motives? Are you secure in who and what you are without needing to *prove* it to others?

Another important area of discussion is how well do you adapt to change? Are you an agent of change or do you fervently resist needed change? In 1991, two German mountain climbers came across a unique discovery in the Tyrolean Alps between Austria and Italy. It had been an unusually warm summer and the Alpine glacial ice was melting quickly after several years of above-average temperatures. What they found was absolutely incredible! Sticking out of the ice was the 4,600-year-old mummified remains of a man who lived in the Neolithic age. The Austrian press quickly dubbed him the "Iceman" and the discovery was a sensational find for science. First of all, his body was very well preserved, including the contents of his last meal! He was clothed in a leather insulated coat and boots. Along side him was his backpack, a bow, arrows, a copper headed ax, a flint lighter and kindling to build a fire. To the complete amazement of researchers, here was a man *frozen in time* for about 4,600 years. He was virtually unchanged from the moment he died.

There is an analogy I would like to draw from this actual event. How well do you *know thyself* and your capacity to adopt to change? The iceman died many millennia ago and had not changed. Even though he was in step with *his times*, the world had changed dramatically since the day he was apparently killed by an attacker and frozen in a sudden snowstorm. By modern standards he had become an oddity or novelty to study because many things about him had long ago become obsolete. During past millennia the world had greatly advanced, but he had not. So there he was, an individual frozen in time, unchanged and now considered... primitive. If we are not careful, we can cling to personal habits and traits that have become obsolete and well past their time! We too can become *frozen* in time and greatly limit our potential as a leader of others.

First, let's discuss some things that should *never* change. Sound moral principles, ethical judgments and right values should not change. For example, treating others with respect, dignity and kindness are universal and timeless principles. Keeping our promises,

commitments and responsibilities are eternal standards. Expressing thankfulness and appreciation to others for the things they do for us or others is a timeless virtue. Yet, there are certain characteristics and ideas that we need to change in order to achieve our highest potential. Change is not a single accomplishment, but an ongoing project. If we make a serious effort to *know thyself* we will discover there are many things we possess that have now outlived their usefulness. These may include archaic ideas, poor personality traits, negative attitudes or outmoded work habits. We become so comfortable with these traits we may seldom notice them. But others probably do, and in time they become a barrier to our personal growth and to our ability to lead. When we become primitive and allow our skills to become obsolete we lose our credibility to lead.

Personal leadership is not about *comfort zones* or the status quo, it is about a passion for *continual* growth and improvement. Every positive and healthy change that has ever occurred in human civilization has only come about by great struggle and by rejecting the way things were as “good enough”. Personal leaders accept the challenge to make things better...to inspire others to become better...to win! In contrast, most folks will accept only a very *limited* degree of change or accountability. Therefore they don't seek to become winners, they just try *not* to lose! John Gardner reminds us that, “Most people in most organizations most of the time are more stale than they know, more bored than they care to admit. All too often it is because they have not been encouraged to use their own initiative and powers of decision. And if they are not expected to use their decision-making powers, they are off the hook of responsibility”. Personal leadership is the opposite of this common workplace dilemma. It is all about initiative, decision-making and responsibility.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that most major religious faiths in the world designate a period of time, or a season, for their followers to perform a candid self-analysis of their lives. A designated time is set aside on the calendar to get to *know thyself!* Personal leaders know their strengths *and* weaknesses. They work hard to build on their strengths and use them to propel their life in a *positive* direction. They also work diligently to correct, or at least modify their weaknesses. A personal leader is willing to do a critical self-appraisal and examine themselves to discover where they *need* to do better. Steven Covey has written the following powerful statement. “The place to begin building any relationship is inside ourselves, inside our circle of influence, our own character.” This inner relationship, like all healthy relationships...must be built around honesty and not self-denial.

Yes, it is indeed important to acknowledge our faults, and to accept responsibility for them. However, once this is done it is also important to let it go and get on with life. We can't change what we did or said yesterday. We can apologize, and resolve to be better, but we can't change the past. There is no benefit to “mentally reliving” or beating ourselves up over and over again for something that has already occurred and can't be reversed. We can't do anything about what has *already* happened but we can learn from it, and have a positive effect on tomorrow! This is why personal leaders learn to focus on the *present*, and not dwell excessively on the past.

In conclusion, I want to leave you with a final question. Why do you *really* want to be a leader? If you desire to lead others primarily for the sake of money, I can guarantee you will end up being incredibly disappointed. While you are consumed with getting all the things that money can buy, you will be *losing* out on the things money *can't* buy! Money can't buy respect, honor, contentment, deep loving relationships, or a purpose that really satisfies. If you work hard and desire to lead others primarily for the sake of power or prestige, you will

also become greatly disappointed. Like other selfish motives, the craving for power doesn't provide lasting satisfaction.

The right motives for leadership include the desire to accomplish good things, serving others to help make them better, and a passion to make a positive difference in the world. Only when you truly know thyself have you discovered your real motives. Remember, the great possessions of life are not simply those things we discover on the outside, but what we also discover and develop within.

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