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Entrepreneurial Legend Herb Kelleher's '14 Ways to Be a Leader'

In a powerful commencement address in 2004, the Southwest Airlines co-founder held forth with wit and wisdom on the disciplines that define true leadership.



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Southwest Airlines Co-Founder Herb Kelleher passed away at the age of 87 on January 3, 2019.

Despite soaring fuel costs and a glut of domestic airline seats, Southwest Airlines reported its 32nd consecutive annual profit in 2004. At that year's Texas McCombs BBA commencement, [Herb Kelleher](#), co-founder, chairman, and CEO of Southwest Airlines, delivered the keynote remarks.

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Kelleher began by proclaiming the commencement to be a splendid occasion. “Why? Because you are the kind of audience I crave; you have to listen to my thoughts, no matter how dull, how puerile, or even how depraved those thoughts might be,” he said with a sly grin.

The address that followed was classic Kelleher. (Point No. 4 has been slightly modified by Kelleher in retrospect.)

I’d like to talk, relatively briefly, about “leadership.” And, I’ll try to do so using the right number of words. Why leadership? Because leaders, in the home, in the workplace, and in public life, are always in short supply. Because the world needs leadership. And because I hope that each and every graduate today will want to be a leader.

Why would you want to be a leader? Well, if you’re not a leader, then I guess you are a follower. How do you wish to be remembered by your children and grandchildren, as a leader or as a follower?

A long time ago, there was a beer commercial with the signature line: “You only go around once!” The implication of that commercial was that, since we all die, we should respond to our mortality by drinking a lot of beer. But is that all there is? I don’t think so. Instead, to my mind, our mortality signifies that we have one earthly chance to make a mark — to be remembered — as a leader who accomplished something constructive for humankind.

To be an effective, positive leader, I believe that you need, at a minimum, the following characteristics:

1. You have to be genuinely interested in, and like, people.

Show them tolerance, patience, respect, and empathy. Drown them in a tsunami of gratitude for their marvelous works. Show them that you admire, value, and love them as individuals, rather than just as “producers.” Through word, and by deed, join in their every personal exaltation and their every personal mishap and grief. People will respond with an esprit de corps — a desire to perform because they want to, not because they have to. An organization bound by love is far more powerful than one bound by fear.

2. You have to have respect for the worth of every job and task, and for the person doing it — in essence, respect for excellent performance.

I have known dumb rich people and smart poor people. I have known dishonest civic leaders and gamblers who are the soul of integrity. Position and title, in and of themselves alone, signify nothing.

3. You have to work harder than anyone working with you.

How can you convince people that accomplishment is important to them if you don't demonstrate, by your actions, that it is important to you?

4. You must have a modicum of domain knowledge in order to make sound judgments with respect to proposed courses of action.

Louis B. Mayer (founder of MGM Studios) probably went too far when he said: “How can you teach the cook to make soup if you don't know how to make soup yourself?” I am not suggesting that the leader of Campbell Soup needs to be a soup chef, but I am signifying that it might be helpful if he or she knew enough about the process to reject a lousy proposed recipe for a new product (Salamander tail bouillon — too salty!). There is a difference between “micromanagement,” which deprives others of initiative, creativity, and growth, and “micro-knowledge,” which aids in making excellent leadership decisions.

5. You must have a sense of humor, which, in effect, is a sense of proportion.

Don't sweat the small stuff — fun relieves strain and promotes enjoyment, harmony, and efficiency. Robert Frost said: "Isn't it a shame that people's minds work furiously until they get to work, and then they stop?" Allow people to be themselves in the workplace, to have fun at what they're doing, and their bodies will show up early, while their minds stay late. You don't have to look and act like a "brick" to be a successful leader.

6. You must maintain a real open-door policy.

Check your desk calendar to see if you're really doing it. One of our officers said to me years ago: "Herb, it's harder for me to get in to see you than it is for a mechanic, a pilot, a flight attendant, or a reservations agent." I said in reply: "I can explain that to you very easily — they're more important than you are!"

7. You must make decisions quickly.

There is no perfect knowledge. Do not endlessly plan, discuss, and study in an effort to avoid the risk involved in actually making a decision. Focus on the externalities, the world outside your navel or your institution; speedily gather the available facts; quickly do the analysis and discuss it with the appropriate people, and go to it. Damon Runyon, the author and humorist best known for "Guys & Dolls," wrote: "It may be that the race is not always to the swift, but that's not the way to bet!"

8. You must have excellent core values and be able to communicate those values and your goals with frequency and passion.

If you don't communicate what you value, and where you're going, with passion, why would anyone else choose to go with you?

9. You must value diversity in organizations.

A multitude of people with the same looks, origins, backgrounds, thoughts, and philosophies will lead you to a harmonious, placid, contented, and self-satisfied organizational end result: disaster.

10. You must emphasize substance over form.

Rules, organizational manuals, computers, and such are servants, not masters; they are the means to an end, not ends in and of themselves. And, in a business context, always remember what you ultimately have in your hand when something is printed out: not action, but merely little black marks on a white sheet of paper.

11. You must be “jazzed” by problem solving, the same way that a fireman gets a “buzz” out of extinguishing fires.

And the worst problem you'll ever have is the problem you won't acknowledge and address.

12. You must have foresight, an exceptional attention span (therein lies genius), relational, synergistic thinking and you must be prepared to adjust, for there is security only in readiness to change direction (not principles).

13. You must set as your goals achievement and excellence — for your self-satisfaction.

Money and happiness are byproducts only — byproducts of achievement and of excellence. Someone will always have more money than you do and someone will always be giddier than you are. But they may not have the same feeling of self-satisfaction and self-worth that you do if you have been excellent at whatever you do.

14. With respect to the value of leadership, a United Technologies ad of some years ago sums it up pretty well, in my estimation. Its title is: “Let's get rid of management!”

I will leave you with four thoughts:

1. Either Bianca Jagger or Calvin Coolidge stated that: “The business of business is business.” That’s wrong. The business of business is people — yesterday, today, and forever;
2. That you can do really well for yourself by doing good for others;
3. That an illustration of the most proven, tested, and consummate leader you can find is someone who has successfully led a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA); and
4. That the most effective leader of all is one who leads by personal example.

You have just proved that you are great leaders. How? By exhibiting great leadership traits: patience and kindness. You have demonstrated incredible patience and incredible kindness by politely listening to a bunch of homilies from an ignoramus like me.

I have never been more honored than to be here, with you, today.



John Sibley Butler

Professor John S. Butler well remembers Kelleher's remarks back in 2004.

“Herb is incomparable, and our graduates knew they were listening to the real thing, a man who had created one of the most admired corporations in America,” he recalls. “It was a commencement to remember.”

Butler is the founding director of the Herb Kelleher Center for Entrepreneurship Growth and Renewal, and is director of the Jon Brumley Texas Venture Labs. He hosted Kelleher at several school events, opening the door for students, faculty, and alumni to experience the wit and wisdom of an entrepreneurial legend.

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