20 Things You Can Learn About Leadership From Moses

Explore the genius of the world’s first great leaders.
Moses was the first great Israelite prophet. He is also one of the greatest leaders in human history. Yet, had God read Moses’ resume before hiring him, God would not have likely been impressed. Moses was born a slave. He has a stutter and a temper. And the only work he did before God called him was caring for his father-in-law’s sheep. Yet, Moses goes on to challenge the world’s most powerful ruler, and lead a people from oppression to freedom. He brings down the Torah and teaches the people the Ten Commandments. He is the protagonist of a story told around the world to this very day.

What made him such an outstanding leader? From one perspective, we might simply say God. God chose Moses. God guided Moses. God stood behind Moses. This is all true. But Moses also knew how to lead. Moses displayed qualities that impressed those who did not believe in the God he represented. In other words, Moses’ leadership displayed universal truths and insights. He can teach people of all faiths.

So, I invite you to explore the genius of the world’s first great leaders – here are 20 things you can learn about leadership from Moses.
1. Take a Stand

Moses is raised in Pharaoh’s palace. He is a prince of Egypt. According to the Talmud, he doesn’t leave the palace until age 15. But when he leaves, he sees slave-masters beating his fellow Israelites. His illusions are shattered. He knows all is not right with the world.

He decides he cannot remain who he was. He needs to challenge slavery. He needs to take a stand against injustice.

This is the first major test of Moses’ leadership. He is, to use a different religious idea, “born again.” The Prince of Egypt” because an Israelite again.

All leaders, as my teacher Howard Haas says, “need to be born again.”

*What experiences led you to become a leader? Have you been born again?*

2. Persist

When Moses first confronts Pharaoh and tells him to “Let my people go,” Pharaoh laughs. He brushes Moses off. This pattern repeats several times.

Moses could easily have given up. He faced difficult odds to begin with. Who was this lowly shepherd to challenge the Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler on earth?

But Moses persists. Behind his persistence was faith. He knew the justness of his cause. He knew, as the Chicago Blues Brothers’ later put it, that he was “on a mission from God.”

*What keeps you going? What helps you persist in the face of disappointment?*
3. Find Your Core

Moses is passionate about justice. It awakens him to empathy with his fellow Israelites. It leads him to act to defend them. It leads him to defend the helpless Midianite sisters at the well. It leaves him no choice but to accept God’s call to lead the Israelites to freedom.

Moses knows who he is. He knows what is important to him. He is not only called by God. He is also called by a vision of a world redeemed.

*What motivates your leadership? What are your core values?*

4. Know When to Take a Risk

Moses listens to God. Moses obeys God’s word. But Moses also challenges God at critical moments.

Moses does not challenge out of petulance. Moses questions God out of passion.

The seminal moment is atop Mount Sinai when God expresses anger at the Israelites for building a golden calf. God vows to destroy the people for their blasphemy.

Moses urges God to reconsider. In effect, Moses tells God to “cool it.” Moses defends the people, saying they may have sinned but they can repent.

It took courage for Moses to take that risk. In the end, however, God agrees with him. The people are saved. The covenant is sustained.

*When have you taken a big risk? Did you appreciate or regret it?*
5. Meet People Where They Are

Moses receives the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Torah on Mount Sinai. He could have proclaimed it from the mountain as well. He could have lectured the Israelites from its comfortable perch.

Yet, Moses chooses another route. He goes amongst the people, teaching and embodying the law. He shows rather than tells.

This connection with the people was especially important at that moment because they had just witnessed God’s power at Sinai. They had seen the smoke and heard the thunder of God’s presence. By teaching and walking amongst them, Moses gives a human face to God’s presence. Moses makes the Torah real.

*How do you connect with people? How do you take complex ideas and make them relevant?*

6. Be Clear About What You Want

When Moses appears before Pharaoh, he comes with a clear message. In God’s name Moses says, “Let my people go so they may serve me.”

Moses does not come with ambivalence. He does not come with doubt. He comes with clarity of conviction and vision, and he reveals them to Pharaoh.

Had Moses waffled, Pharaoh would have pounced. He would have led Moses to compromise or delay the dream of freedom. Moses’ faith gave him the clarity. And he put it to good use.

*Are you clear about what you want out of your leadership? What can help you become clearer?*
7. Find a Good Deputy

Siblings in the Bible do not have a good track record. Cain murders Abel, Jacob manipulates Esau, Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery.

Moses and Aaron, however, get along. Even though he is the elder brother, Aaron becomes Moses’ deputy and mouthpiece. He speaks for Moses before Pharaoh. He fills in for Moses when Moses is called to speak to God. He is the peacemaker when Moses loses his temper.

Aaron helps make Moses Moses.

*Do you have a good deputy? What needs is he or she filling?*

8. Know the Needs of Your Boss

Everyone has a boss, even Moses. Moses’ boss happens to be God. And even though God may be perfect, Moses is not privy to all God’s perfection. Moses has to work with the God he experiences. And that God has needs.

Among those needs is the loyalty of the Israelites. When they build a Golden Calf, God understandably questions that loyalty. Moses, however, is able to reassure God and improve the situation. Moses knows God cares about the Divine reputation.

So Moses says, in effect, what will everyone think if the people You chose and You freed from Egypt are destroyed? God knows it will diminish God’s name in the world. So God changes. The covenant is sustained.

*What unique needs does your boss have? How do you meet them?*
9. Use Symbols Effectively

The Israelites that left Egypt were made up of 12 tribes. Each tribe had a unique culture and identity. Moses had to figure out ways to unify them.

One of the most effective strategies was using symbols. The Ark of the Covenant was the most memorable and powerful.

Just as the American flag unifies 50 states, so the portable ark connected the twelve tribes. It brought God into their midst, and it brought them, as one people, into God’s midst. It stood, literally and figuratively, at the center of their community.

What symbols bring you and your co-workers together? What strategies do you use to overcome natural differences?

10. Be Transparent Where it Counts

Certain conversations are meant to take place only between Moses and God. Yet, most of what he knows and believes Moses shares with the people. He is astonishingly transparent, as best evidenced during the construction of the portable tabernacle.

The Bible tells us Moses kept meticulous records of all the contributions and the way they were used. He made it clear he did not abuse his power and used all the contributions to build the tabernacle and glorify God. His transparency gave the people greater confidence in his leadership.

Where do you need to be transparent? How might it affect those with whom you work?
11. Get the Right People on Board at the Beginning

Moses was an outsider among the Israelites. Remember, he was never a slave. He was raised in Pharaoh’s palace, a prince of Egypt. When God tells him to lead the people out of Egypt, Moses is terrified. What if they reject me, he wonders?

God suggests Moses speak first to the elders of Israel. In effect, Moses gets the key leaders on board first. He populates his leadership team with family and reputable figures. Their presence gives Moses greater credibility. Had he not done so, Moses may well have been rejected before he had a chance to lead.

*Do you have the right people on board? Did you ever lack credibility because you did not initially get the right support?*

12. Never Coast

Moses has a long career. He begins as a shepherd in the wilderness of Midian. He comes before Pharaoh and leads the Israelites across the Red Sea. Then he stands at their helm for 40 years as they wonder through the desert.

If anyone could have gotten away with resting on their laurels and position, it was Moses. His authority came directly from God. When he was challenged, God punished the perpetrators.

Yet, Moses remains focused and forward-looking throughout his life. He does not stop doing or caring. Indeed, the Bible tells us that near the end of his life, “his eyes were undimmed and vigor unabated.”

*Do you know any leaders who have coasted? What message did that send you?*
13. Do the Most Important Conversations Face to Face

E-mail is a great gift. It allows us to connect with people all over the world. Yet, it can also create distance between people who sit right next to one another.

Virtual interaction loses the gestures, body movement and inexplicable sense we get when we encounter someone in person. When we truly need to connect—to know the other in an intimate powerful way—we need to encounter them face-to-face.

When Moses confronts Pharaoh, he does so in person. When Moses and God speak, they often, according to the text, talk panim el panim, face to face. The connection becomes deeper and more consequential. Each party leaves the interaction transformed.

*Do you agree that the most important conversations should happen face to face? What is lost in virtual interactions?*

14. Invite Disagreement and Debate

Judaism has the idea of sacred argument. We best discern God’s truth when we discuss it from different perspectives.

This idea can make some uncomfortable. Shouldn’t God’s truth be clear and easy to discern?

Well, life is complicated, as is leadership. The answers aren’t always clear. We need to invite different voices into our conversation. Moses does so from the very beginning. He consults with the elders. He consults with Aaron. He even seeks advice from his father-in-law.

Moses is a leader who knows his own limitations. He knows he grows in wisdom as he learns from others. That is why he is called the “most humble man on earth.”

*What do you do to ensure that you hear different perspectives on important issues?*
15. Give Necessary Criticism

Some people do not like confrontation. They fear hurting another’s feelings or think life is hard enough as it is. Why should we criticize someone who probably has enough to worry about?

Some people also like to criticize simply for their own sake. They like to make themselves feel good by making others look bad.

Moses teaches us constructive criticism is appropriate and critical. In Leviticus we read, “You shall reprove your fellow . . . and you shall not bear a grudge . . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Constructive criticism can be an expression of caring and even love. It demonstrates a desire to lead and help people realize their potential.

What constructive criticism have you received? Did you change your behavior because of it?

16. Connect Through Authenticity Rather Than Conformity

Recently I watched a program on President Theodore Roosevelt. He was one of the most effective and beloved American presidents during his time. Yet, he was, to use contemporary political language, a member of the 1 percent. He might have even fallen in the .01 percent. He was wealthy and aristocratic. And he didn’t pretend to be otherwise.

Yet, as the program pointed out, it was his lack of pretending—his authenticity—that endeared him to the public. He knew who he was, and so did the people. He did not try to be someone else.

Moses followed the same strategy. He was raised in Pharaoh’s palace. He probably spoke with an aristocratic lilt. He did not, however, pretend that he grew up a slave. He knew who he was, and he led from that foundation. The people may have felt jealous at first, but they came to respect and follow him. Leadership depends on authenticity.

Have you ever felt inauthentic as a leader? Who are the most authentic leaders you know?
17. Delegate Wisely

Moses may have benefited from the wisdom of history’s first management consultant. That would be his father-in-law Jethro.

When Jethro comes to visit in the Book of Exodus, Moses feels out of control. He is overwhelmed by all the disputes he is forced to adjudicate. He lacks the time and energy to focus on the important tasks only he can do.

Jethro gives him some sound advice. Create lower courts and officials to handle the smaller disputes. Deal only with the problems that no one else can solve. Consult with God when you can’t figure it out for yourself.

Moses follows Jethro’s advice and becomes more effective. He is probably also better rested and happier as a leader and human being.

Where do you need to delegate better?

18. Know When to Take the Scenic Route

A traditional Jewish proverb says “It took four days to get Israel out of Egypt. It took 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel.” The idea is that the Israelites could not change overnight. They may have become physically free in four days. But it took them much longer to become mentally free. It took much longer to change their mindset.

Moses knew the change would be difficult. Thus, he led them on the scenic route from Egypt to the Promised Land. Had they gone directly from Egypt to Israel, it would have taken a few weeks. Instead, it takes 40 years.

Yes, the Bible gives us other explanations for their prolonged wandering. But one of its great advantages was preparing the people for freedom.

Have you ever implemented change too quickly?
19. Match People to Their Strengths

Moses knows his own limitations. He also seems to know the strengths and weaknesses of the people he leads. When God asks him to build a portable tabernacle, Moses matches Israelites to their proper roles. Overall design and construction responsibilities are given to Bezalel, who is blessed with artistic genius.

We all have a unique gift. So do the people with whom we work. Great leaders find way to match the gifts of the people with the needs of the moment. We need to look for those gifts and stop trying to fit square pegs into round holes.

What unique gifts do you have? How do you use the gifts of your colleagues

20. Speak to the Heart

We often think people are motivated by the pocketbook. Some are. Yet, as Daniel Pink pointed out in his seminal book, Drive, most of us are also motivated by a desire to contribute, to realize our gifts and potential. We live not only from head or hand. We live from the heart.

Moses knew this. The Bible tells us that when the tabernacle was built, everyone gave “as their heart so moved them.” The amount of contributions exceeded all needs and expectations.

We can only imagine the way Moses inspired those contributions. He likely spoke to his people’s deepest hopes and yearnings. He knew the tabernacle was the way to bring God into their midst, and that was the Israelites’ most heartfelt need and desire.

Speaking to the heart can be challenging and uncomfortable. But it is also the most thing a leader does.

Which leaders have spoken to your heart? How did they do so?