

Don't Know Much About His-tor-eeee!

Why Successful Business Leaders Love History

“A nation that expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization ... expects what never was and never will be,” Thomas Jefferson remarked on his rationale for being a voracious reader of history.

As modern businesspeople read about the leaders of the past, they want to learn what they can do today when their companies are at stake. Current leaders in business and nonprofits face a faltering economy, an unstable international situation, a credit crunch, fierce competition, and shifting demographics. These situations are remarkably similar to the challenges faced by the U.S. leaders who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 to draft a new constitution and form a government to tackle the issues. Some modern business owners are learning and applying success secrets from these founders.

Seven Historical Secrets of Successful Leaders

What are the historical secrets today's successful and savvy business leaders know that less successful ones don't?

- **History matters:** Despite the words of the old pop song, “Don't Know Much About His-tor-eeee!” smart businesspeople know the importance of learning from the past. They're interested not only in avoiding mistakes, but also understanding how important leaders faced monumental challenges and succeeded. The U.S. founders were all history buffs. As the framers debated the details of the Constitution, they pointed to specific lessons from the rise and fall of the Roman Republic to make our own republic more robust.
- **Downtime matters:** Successful people know the importance of relaxation, including reading. They are clear about their priorities. These folks spend time resting and enjoying their families and friends. Their historical counterparts enjoyed rich social and family lives, were physically active and never stopped reading and thinking. The founders didn't have seminars on work-life balance but still achieved more than most people today, while making time for enjoying life.
- **Learning matters:** Strategic businesspeople read, watch or listen to history and biographies because they enjoy learning. They are always looking for ways to improve their performances by absorbing the lessons of the past. George Washington, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin left a rich legacy of their ongoing self-improvement efforts. When the framers wrote in the Constitution they wanted “to establish a more perfect union,” they were reflecting their personal journeys seeking to become more perfect leaders.
- **Citizenship matters:** Admired business leaders admire their country and its history and want to learn from it. They look for ways to practice their citizenship whether on the local, national or global level. They not only served on nonprofit boards, they mentor students, build homes and dish up dinner in soup kitchens. Ben Franklin founded dozens of civic organizations, while Alexander Hamilton and John Jay helped found one of the early societies for the abolition of slavery. Thomas Jefferson founded a university to create an “academical village” to

- mingle formal education with practical commercial learning. The founders constantly looked for ways to improve their world.
- **Government matters:** It's easy to complain about government. But unless a businessperson understands the origins and current functioning of our government, he or she will find it difficult to interact with it effectively or be a good citizen. Our "Founding Parents" never turned down the call of their country to serve it. They believed it was their duty to be in public service at some point, even when it would interfere with their business and personal affairs.
 - **Leadership matters:** Real leaders are committed to becoming better leaders. What better role models to learn from than the towering successes and all too human shortcomings of the nation's founders? We can all learn from the U.S. founders precisely because they are so like us, so human. They struggled with the same shortcomings modern leaders must overcome. They provide a practical guide to leading under the most difficult circumstances.
 - **Survival matters:** The founders staked "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor," believing liberty required an informed public. Modern and historic leaders know national survival requires more than an extravaganza of politics every four years. Many of the key political debates today hinge on what was going on in the minds and lives of U.S. leaders in the late 18th and early 19th century. Modern business leaders know these continuing debates will have a direct effect on whether their companies will survive and thrive in a tough economic climate. They stay informed, learn from history and encourage their employees, friends and family to stay up-to-date and involved.

Learn from Historical Leaders

Today, learning from the past is easier than ever with information and media readily available to every leader. Over the last decade, the publication of an unprecedented number of enthralling histories and biographies means there is no excuse for ignorance of American history and its implications for today.

American culture has always had an anti-intellectual strain, the price we pay perhaps for trying to establish a society where all people "are created equal." But look at the country's admired founders. They were certainly not anti-intellectuals. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Abigail Adams, all of whom were self-educated, were admired by their contemporaries for their keen minds. Alexander Hamilton, often acknowledged as one of the most brilliant minds of his generation, was a self-made man with who dropped out of college to join the Revolution. Of course, the formally educated Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and John Adams are also seen as formidable intellects. Successful modern leaders never stop learning and are not ashamed to bring their insights from their learning into making decisions and leading their organizations.

Smart managers, savvy entrepreneurs, successful owners, strategic businesspeople "know a lot about his-tor-eeee" and they apply it every day. So flip on that TV, slip in that

DVD, surf the web, download an MP3, crank up that CD or grab a book and start your leadership learning journey today. The founding fathers and mothers are waiting to coach *you* to brilliance.

About the Author:

Rebecca Staton-Reinstein, Ph.D., President of Advantage Leadership, Inc., works with leaders who want to grow their companies strategically, transform results, and engage employees. She is the author of “Conventional Wisdom: How Today’s Leaders Plan, Perform and Progress Like the Founding Fathers,” and “Success Planning: A ‘How-To’ Guide for Strategic Planning.” Learn more at www.AdvantageLeadership.com.