

William H. McRaven - Leadership Review

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CPD 400: Foundations of Leadership

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An author, a commentator, a board member for various fortune 500 companies, a university chancellor, a leader of the 21st century, and he was also a Navy SEAL. Retired Navy Admiral William H. McRaven is known for his role in planning and supervising Operation NEPTUNE SPEAR, which was a special operations mission that resulted in the elimination of Osama bin Laden on May 2nd, 2011. I served in a subordinate unit during his command tour at United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM), so I was aware of him, but I would argue, that I really took notice of him when he became internet famous for the commencement speech he delivered at the University of Texas at Austin to the graduating Class of 2014. From The University of Texas at Austin YouTube page, his speech has garnered over 5.7 million views. The YouTube page MotivationHub created a motivational speech video from his commencement address, and it has been viewed over 35 million times. McRaven turned that speech into a book in which he shares ten principles in which anyone can use these basic lessons to change themselves for the better. His most recent book, *“The Wisdom of the Bullfrog: Leadership Made Simple (but Not Easy)”* focus’ on his views on 18 leadership traits in which he writes, “... hopefully provide value on your road to being a better leader.” (McRaven, 2023). McRaven’s ability to capture leadership lessons with inspirational mottoes, parables, creeds, and stories offer an opportunity to take the best of what leadership is and make these ideas your own. These character traits and skills of leadership that McRaven has offered span across a wide range of principles that every leadership should consider. These digestible ideas are relevant today and will continue to impact individuals in the future.

Start Your Day with a Task Completed

It is not a ground-breaking statement to hear that “life presents challenges – no matter who you are.” What becomes revolutionary or rather a meaningful change for a person is in the

manner they respond to what life gives them. In his book titled, *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life. . . And Maybe the World*, McRaven gives additional context to the individual lessons from his commencement address. Little did he know that individuals that heard the speech or read the book would fully embrace these lessons and apply them to their everyday lives. I for one have as well. I am a better person for it. I would also argue that I am a better leader as well. McRaven's ideas can be credited with this growth.

McRaven provides ten lessons that he learned throughout his SEAL training. His recurring theme throughout the speech is a call to the goal of the University of Texas at Austin, which is, "What starts here changes the world" (Leahy, 2006). The idea of changing the world is a grand thought. The idea of you as an individual changing the world is an even bigger idea that is difficult to comprehend. It is an enormous idea to think about. But these types of ideas are the ones that can have an impact on our entire worldview. It can be a powerful message to one person and in the end that idea can affect so many others. During McRaven's speech he captures the ideals for how someone can impact the world and his send off to those graduates and all that have either viewed or read his speech is poignant,

Start each day with a task completed. Find someone to help you through life. Respect everyone. Know that life is not fair and that you will fail often, but if you take some risks, step up when the times are toughest, face down the bullies, lift up the downtrodden and never, ever give up (The University of Texas at Austin, 2014).

These words carry significance because they are not only outstanding life lessons but can also be applied to further build on one's leadership foundation.

Communicate Your Actions

An interesting title that Admiral McRaven held while serving in the Navy, is in 2011, he was named the “Bullfrog”. This is given to the longest serving SEAL on active duty. In his latest book, *The Wisdom of the Bullfrog: Leadership Made Simple (but Not Easy)*, McRaven shares stories that reinforce his beliefs for what it takes to be a great leader. He displays a unique ability to distill these leadership qualities into easily consumable content which can then be put into practice. It has constantly been presented to me throughout my leadership journey having served in the Navy for 23 years that as a leader, you should always look to add tools to your leadership toolbox. These can include the way to best provide feedback to a subordinate or effectively communicate with others. McRaven takes an opportunity to speak to how a leader should be a person of integrity, be trustworthy, have a little humility, be aggressive in solving problems, and encourage your employees to take initiative to name a few. And once again, these leadership characteristics can be applied to your everyday life as well. In the chapter title, “Communication, Communication, Communication” (McRaven, 2023), he lists three takeaways after sharing a story in which he failed to communicate with the rest of his team even though he took charge of completing a task. He believed he took charge and defeated an adversary, but from the perspective of his team he was supposed to be leading, he left them unaware of his actions. While these takeaways are simple, as any good leader knows and understands, is that leading is hard. The three takeaways were:

1. Establish a means for communications to flow in both directions.
2. Confirm that the values and the goals of the organization are understood down to the lowest-ranking member.
3. Never take a significant action without having a plan for informing the rank and file. (McRaven, 2023)

Leaders tend to get critiqued on whether they have the keen ability to communicate. This includes not only putting out information or guidance but listening as well. McRaven articulates the value of communication as the following, “Everyone understands the importance of good communications, but time and time again, leaders fail to ensure that their goals, objectives, values, and intentions are clearly understood... Communications require constant effort on the part of the leader” (McRaven, 2023). Constant effort is something I recognize as a critical component for communicating effectively.

A Positive Lasting Impact

To make four-star Admiral is a significant accomplishment on its own. However, McRaven was thrown a few obstacles in his life that informed his thoughts and beliefs on not only leadership but how to address all the things life has to offer as well. He suffered a parachuting accident which resulted in significant injuries. He battled cancer. He even recovered following being fired from his first leadership assignment. These life events could have deterred him at any time in the Navy. McRaven chose a road less traveled and recovered from his injuries, defeated cancer, and worked harder to regain the trust in his chain of command to be given the responsibility to lead groups of Navy SEALs again. I am left wondering if this alone equates to being a great leader. He is an interesting figure and leader for our modern era. He can be contributed as a leader to emulate and follow and based on all public accounts, he is effective in the results of those he led. I feel strongly that he speaks to ideals and beliefs that can not only make you a better person, but a highly effective leader as well.

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