

THE BIG IDEAS

18 Leadership Axioms

Simple but not easy.

Death Before Dishonor

It all starts with integrity.

When in Command

COMMAND.

No Plan Survives

First contact with the enemy.

When in Doubt, Overload

P for Plenty.

"The most tragic thing in the world is a man of genius who is not a man of honor."

~ George Bernard Shaw

The Wisdom of the Bullfrog

Leadership Made Simple (But Not Easy)

BY ADMIRAL WILLIAM H. MCRAVEN · GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING © 2023 · 224 PAGES

"So, how do we make the difficult nature of leadership simple? Well, for thousands of years militaries have relied on mottoes, creeds, parables, and stories to inspire, to motivate, and to guide leaders and followers alike. These sayings serve to reinforce certain behaviors. They also provide a memory prompt, a Pavlovian response, and an inspirational surge that helps direct individual actions in the midst of uncertainty.

Serving in the military, I relied heavily on these sayings to guide my actions. ...

In this book, I have collected eighteen of these sayings that have guided me throughout my career: mottoes, parables, creeds, and stories that have served me well when I was starting a new assignment or had a particularly difficult leadership challenge.

The eighteen chapters are a mix of Personal Qualities and Professional Actions. Every leader must have certain qualities they exhibit in their personal life if they hope to lead well. But a strong character alone is not sufficient for success. As a leader you must take actions to build a plan, communicate its intent, inspect its progress, hold people (and yourself) accountable. Together, qualities and actions are the building blocks of great leaders.

The road to becoming the Bull Frog was not easy. No road to the top ever is, but I hope you will find wisdom in these pages that will make your road to the top much easier to travel."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven from *Wisdom from the Bullfrog*

This is our fourth Note on one of Admiral McRaven's great books.

We started with [Make Your Bed](#), then we featured his memoir, [Sea Stories](#), then we featured [The Hero Code](#). They're all FANTASTIC. So, of course, when I saw Admiral McRaven had published this book, I immediately got it. Read it. Loved it. Here we are. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

As we discussed in the previous Notes, as a four-star admiral, McRaven's final assignment was as Commander of all U.S. Special Operations Forces.

He served as a Navy SEAL for 37 years. By the time he hit 34 years of service, he was officially anointed as the "Bull Frog"—the longest serving frogman and Navy SEAL on active duty.

This book, as per the title, is wisdom from this legendary bullfrog. McRaven distills leadership into its most fundamental components, delivering on the subtitle: "Leadership Made Simple (But Not Easy)."

As you'd expect, it's PACKED with practical wisdom. Let's take a quick look at some of my favorite Big Ideas. We'll start with a super-quick look at those eighteen military aphorisms that guided his extraordinary career.

"The great corporations of this country were not founded by ordinary people. They were founded by people with extraordinary intelligence, ambition, and aggressiveness."

~ Daniel Patrick Moynihan

P.S. Before we jump in, here are some quick links to Notes on other great books by extraordinary military leaders that I think you'll also enjoy: [It Worked for Me](#) by Colin Powell, [Call Sign Chaos](#) by James Mattis, [Courage Under Fire](#) by James Stockdale, [Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot](#) by James Stockdale, [Learn How to Lead to Win](#) by Mike Manazir, [Leaders](#) by Stanley McChrystal, and [Lead Yourself First](#) by Michael Erwin.

Plus: Here are some great books by Navy SEALs: [Extreme Ownership](#) by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, [Discipline Equals Freedom](#) by Jocko Willink, [Unbeatable Mind](#) by Mark Divine, [The Way of the SEAL](#) by Mark Divine, [Embrace the Suck](#) by Brent Gleeson, [Can't Hurt Me](#) by David Goggins, [Never Finished](#) by David Goggins, and [Fearless](#) by Eric Blehm.

P.P.S. The current four-star general commanding the U.S Special Operations Forces is General Bryan P. Fenton. I was deeply honored to receive an invitation from GEN Fenton and his team to present at a recent USSOCOM First SOF Truth event on Resiliency. (Learn more [on LinkedIn here](#) and [on Heroic here](#).)

I gave my presentation just a few days before creating this Note and had the privilege of spending time with USSOCOM's commanding officers including one of the most recent "Bullfrogs," Vice Admiral Tim Szymanski. Being in the presence of these Heroic protectors was deeply humbling and equally inspiring.

It is very easy to take the freedoms we enjoy for granted. I do not. It is because of the sacrifices of these brave men and women (and their families!) that we have the opportunity to flourish. Serving the Force and their Families to repay our debt to them is a sacred honor and one that I am fiercely committed to fulfilling at the highest possible level.

And now... Let's get to work!

18 LEADERSHIP AXIOMS

"Leadership is difficult, and after forty years of being in leadership positions, I am still learning how to be a better leader. I learn from my students in class, from my colleagues at work, from fellow board members, from my family and my friends. But like the advice from the old general, the one thing I know about leadership is that you must keep doing your best every single day and let them see what you've got. And always remember that while leadership is difficult it's not complicated. I hope you will find the wisdom of this old bullfrog of some value on your road to being a better leader."

Those are the final words of the book. They precede a quick distillation of the 18 aphorisms that form the chapters of the book. Let's take a quick look at each then we'll dive in to a few of my favorites. (NOTE: [Go here](#) for a printable version of the Wisdom of the Bullfrog.)

1. **DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR** (Be a person of integrity)
2. **YOU CAN'T SURGE TRUST** (Be trustworthy)
3. **WHEN IN COMMAND, COMMAND** (Be confident in yourself)
4. **WE ALL HAVE FROG FLOATS** (Have a little humility)
5. **THE ONLY EASY DAY WAS YESTERDAY** (Demonstrate that you have stamina)
6. **RUN TO THE SOUND OF THE GUNS** (Be aggressive in solving problems)
7. **SUA SPONTE** (Encourage your team to take the initiative)
8. **WHO DARES WINS** (Be prepared to take risks)
9. **HOPE IS NOT A STRATEGY** (Do the detailed planning necessary for success)
10. **NO PLAN SURVIVES FIRST CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY** (Have a Plan B)

"Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that this thing must be attained."

~ Marie Curie

"Setting a goal is not the main thing. It is deciding how you will go about achieving it and staying with that plan."

~ Coach Tom Landry

- 11. IT PAYS TO BE A WINNER** (Establish standards of conduct and performance)
- 12. A SHEPHERD SHOULD SMELL LIKE HIS SHEEP** (Spend time on the "factory floor")
- 13. TROOP THE LINE** (Listen to your employees)
- 14. EXPECT WHAT YOU INSPECT** (The quality of your work will depend on the quality of your oversight)
- 15. COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE** (Communicate your actions)
- 16. WHEN IN DOUBT, OVERLOAD** (Work hard to overcome your shortfalls)
- 17. CAN YOU STAND BEFORE THE LONG GREEN TABLE?** (Be accountable for your actions)
- 18. ALWAYS HAVE A SWIM BUDDY** (Have a partner in your leadership journey)

DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR

"Having a set of moral principles and being a person of integrity are the most important virtues for any leader. In the simplest terms it follows the West Point Honor Code: Don't lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do. This means be honest with your workforce, your customers, and the public. Be fair in your business dealings. Follow the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would have others treat you. If this sounds a bit Pollyannaish or like you're in Sunday school, so be it. Being a person of high integrity is what separates the great leaders from the commonplace.

After thirty-seven years as a Navy SEAL, I am too mindful of my own shortfalls to be overly self-righteous in telling the reader how to behave. However, in spite of my many stumbles along the way, I always found that having a set of principles helped me during the most challenging times of my life and my career.

Before you master any of the other axioms of wisdom, you must first strive to be men and women of honor and integrity. That is what sets the great leaders above the commonplace. It will not be easy. It never is. But it is not complicated."

Welcome to the first chapter of the book and the first axiom of the Bullfrog's wisdom:

"DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR (Be a person of integrity)"

As I read that passage, I thought of Stephen Covey and Nathaniel Branden.

In his great book, *Primary Greatness*, Stephen Covey tells us: "Character, what you are, is ultimately more important than competence, what you can do. Primary greatness is, at its base, a matter of character."

Then Covey outlines the twelve key levers of success.

The first one? TOTAL INTEGRITY.

He tells us: "When I was working in North Carolina, I was given a shirt imprinted with the state motto in Latin, *Esse quam videri*, which means 'To be rather than to seem.'

This should be the motto of every person seeking primary greatness. Unfortunately, too often, 'seeming to be' substitutes for real integrity. It's 'seeming' as opposed to 'being.'"

And, in his great book, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, Nathaniel Branden tells us: "Integrity is the integration of ideals, convictions, standards, beliefs—and behavior. When our behavior is congruent with our professed values, when ideals and practice match up, we have integrity."

Then Branden makes this VERY important point...

"Nothing ever comes to one, that is worth having, except as a result of hard work."

~ Booker T. Washington

"Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down."

~ Oprah Winfrey

He tells us: "Observe that before the issue of integrity can even be raised we need principles of behavior—moral convictions about what is and is not appropriate—judgments about right and wrong action. If we do not yet hold standards, we are on too low a developmental rung even to be accused of hypocrisy. In such a case, our problems are too severe to be described merely as lack of integrity."

Which begs the question...

What are the virtues with which YOU are most fiercely committed to living in integrity?

WHEN IN COMMAND, COMMAND

"As a leader, you must always appear to be in command, even on those days when you struggle with the pressures of the job. You must be confident. You must be decisive. You must smile. You must laugh. You must engage with your employees and be thankful for their work. You must have the look of a person in charge. You must instill in your men and women a sense of pride that their leaders can handle any problem."

As a leader, you can't have a bad day. You must never look beaten, no matter the circumstance. If you sulk, if you hang your head, if you whine or complain about the leaders above you or the followers below you, then you will lose the respect of your men and women, and the attitude of despair will spread like wildfire.

Being a leader is an awesome responsibility. There are days when it can be frightening to know that the weight of the organization rests on your shoulders. But you must also realize that you were chosen to be the leader because you have proven yourself along the way. You have demonstrated that you know the business. You have shown that you can handle the pressures and be decisive. You have exhibited all the qualities necessary to lead. And even if none of the above holds true, now that you are the leader, you are in command. So, take the damn helm and command!"

Welcome to chapter/axiom #3: "When in Command, Command."

In this chapter, Admiral McRaven tells us the story of one of his heroes: Admiral Chester Nimitz.

Admiral Nimitz was the commander of the Pacific Fleet in World War II. He led the Battle of Midway that turned the tide of the war in the Pacific. McRaven's team surprised him by installing Nimitz's desk in his office when he was in command of SOCOM.

Of course, as leaders, we will have days when we feel overwhelmed and not up to the task of our responsibilities. Nimitz was feeling **exactly** that as he was deciding how to approach the extraordinary challenges of his command of the Pacific and how he would approach Midway. McRaven tells us that he "anguished over his decision for days."

Then, after confessing his apprehension to a fellow Admiral Bull Halsey, Halsey told him: "You once told me that when in command, **command**."

McRaven continues by saying "It was the clarion call that Nimitz needed. He understood that commanders are expected to make the tough decision. To act with purpose. To be confident and lead from the front. To accept the challenge and steal yourself for the rough waters ahead. A commander must command. Command the situation. Command the troops. Command your fears. Take command."

I'm reminded of the parallel wisdom from some other great U.S. military leaders.

As Jim Mattis says in his great book [Call Sign Chaos](#): "A leader's role is problem solving. If you don't like problems, stay out of leadership." And: "The tougher the situation, the more I needed to choose to set a calm example, not allowing long hours and wicked issues to dictate my behavior around a team doing their utmost."

"Ninety-nine percent of all failures come from people who have the habit of making excuses."

~ George Washington Carver

"You have competition every day because you set such high standards for yourself that you have to go out every day and live up to that."

~ Michael Jordan

In [*It Worked for Me*](#), General Colin Powell outlines thirteen rules for leadership. Rule #13 is "Remain Calm. Be Kind."

General Powell echoes Mattis and McRaven's wisdom when he tells us: "*Few people make sound or sustainable decisions in an atmosphere of chaos. The more serious the situation, usually accompanied by a deadline, the more likely everyone will get excited and bounce around like water on a hot skillet. At those times I try to establish a calm zone but retain a sense of urgency. Calmness protects order, ensures that we consider all the possibilities, restores order when it breaks down, and keeps people from shouting over each other.*"

You are in a storm. The captain must steady the ship, watch all the gauges, listen to all the department heads, and steer through it. If the leader loses his head, confidence in him will be lost and the glue that holds the team together will start to give way. So assess the situation, move fast, be decisive, but remain calm and never let them see you sweat. The calm zone is part of an emotional spectrum that I work to maintain."

NO PLAN SURVIVES FIRST CONTACT

"What do you need to know as an officer? What is the most important thing you should consider when developing a plan? What is the most fundamental aspect of war strategy, operations, or tactics?"

Stolfi reached for his last viewgraph, turned off the lights, and before I could answer, he read the quote from Moltke the Elder. It said, 'No plan of operations reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main force.'

'In other words,' Stolfi said, 'always have a Plan B. A contingency plan. A backup plan. Because once you encounter the enemy, no plan survives first contact.'

Over the course of the next two years, with Dr. Russel Stolfi as my faculty advisor, I wrote my postgraduate thesis, entitled *The Theory of Special Operations*. As I researched ten famous missions in special operations history, it was clear to me that Moltke's old axiom stood the test of time. It was not something I would soon forget."

That's from chapter/axiom #10: "No Plan Survives First Contact with the Enemy."

Each chapter's wisdom is preceded by a quote. This chapter's quote is from Taylor Swift. She echoes the great military axiom with her own: "*Just because you made a good plan doesn't mean that's what's gonna happen.*"

"It is better to err on the side of daring than the side of caution."

~ Alvin Toffler, American Writer and Futurist

The great boxer Mike Tyson said the same thing. He tells us: "*Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.*"

Astronaut Chris Hadfield echoes this wisdom as well. In his great book [*An Astronaut's Guide to Life*](#), he tells us: "*It's puzzling to me that so many self-help gurus urge people to visualize victory, and stop there. Some even insist that if you wish for good things long enough and hard enough, you'll get them—and, conversely, that if you focus on the negative, you actually invite bad things to happen. Why make yourself miserable worrying? Why waste time getting ready for disasters that may never happen?*"

Anticipating problems and figuring out how to solve them is actually the opposite of worrying: it's productive. ... My optimism and confidence come not from feeling I'm luckier than other mortals, and they sure don't come from visualizing victory. They're the result of a lifetime spent visualizing defeat and figuring out how to prevent it. Like most astronauts, I'm pretty sure that I can deal with what life throws at me because I've thought about what to do if things go wrong, as well as right. That's the power of negative thinking."

I repeat the most fundamental aspect of strategy/life: No plan survives first contact with reality.

WHEN IN DOUBT, OVERLOAD

"It isn't enough to believe in something; you have to have the stamina to meet the obstacles and overcome them."

~ Golda Meir

"Since WWII, Navy frogmen had been clearing beaches across the Pacific and in preparation for the landing on Normandy. Interestingly enough, the basics of clearing the beach haven't changed since then. A team of frogmen would board a high-speed craft. The boat would approach the beach and drop off the frogmen parallel to the shoreline in water about twenty-one feet deep. Using a plastic slate, a grease pencil, and a lead line, the frogmen would swim the distance in to the beach, diving down along the way to locate the obstacles.

Once each man made his way to the beach and back, the high-speed boat would swing by and pick them up. Back on the mother ship, the leader would chart the location of the obstacles and plan the correct amount of explosives necessary to destroy them. These calculations were precise. For each Scully, a haversack of twenty pounds of C-4 was necessary. Once all the explosives were assembled, the frogmen would reboard the high-speed craft, head back to the beach, load the obstacles with explosives, and detonate the C-4, clearing the way for the Marines. But forty years of clearing beaches from Okinawa to Normandy to Inchon to Vietnam had taught the frogmen one very important lesson: Whenever you were in doubt about the amount of explosives to use—*always overload*. Always put more energy, more force, more power into the solution than seemed necessary. It was the only way to guarantee success in the face of uncertainty and doubt."

That's from chapter/axiom #15: "When in Doubt, Overload." It's my favorite part of the book.

In fact, [as I discuss in this Areté +1°](#), the wisdom from this chapter was THE decisive factor in how I chose to structure [*my* book](#). Although I was 70% done with a "normal," kinda fluffy 250- to 300-page book, after reading this chapter I decided to create a 1,000-page book featuring 451 potentially life-changing ideas.

When in doubt, overload. (Or, as the Army guys like to put it, remember "P" for "Plenty." :)

At the end of every chapter, McRaven has a little "It's simple" section that sums everything up. Here's the summary for this chapter: "1. *Work hard. Everyone expects it from their leader.* 2. *Work harder. Give the extra effort. It will inspire the rank and file.* 3. *Work your hardest. It will open opportunities that didn't exist before.*"

I repeat: When in doubt, OVERLOAD. *Always* put "more energy, more force, more power into the solution" than seems necessary. All day, every day. *Especially* TODAY.

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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[Make Your Bed, Sea Stories, The Hero Code, Call Sign Chaos, It Worked for Me, Leaders, Lead Yourself First, Learn How to Lead to Win, Extreme Ownership, The Way of the SEAL, Can't Hurt Me](#)

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. As a Founder/CEO he's made crowdfunding history and built and sold two social platforms. As a Philosopher/teacher, he's helped millions of people from around the world, trained 10,000+ [Heroic Coaches](#) from 100+ countries and created a protocol that science says changes lives. He lives in the country outside Austin, Texas, with his wife, Alexandra, and their two kids, Emerson and Eleanor. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).