

Two Lessons From The Greatest Leader You've Never Heard Of

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If you want to become the best leader of your era, just lead like Philopoemen did.

Never heard of him? Neither had I, until a puzzling encounter in Madrid's Prado Museum. I later learned about his wonderful leadership attributes (and, along the way, discovered a pretty gory episode).

First, a thumbnail on Philopoemen (d. 183 BC): This extraordinary general was elected eight different times to lead the Achaean League army, an alliance of Greek city states. Eight times? Well, these Greeks weren't into long-term contracts with cushy exit packages: They selected their top general annually. It's testament to his valor and competence that they repeatedly turned to him.

And no wonder they did. The ancient chronicler Plutarch recounts a battle where "both [Philopoemen's] thighs [were] pierced through" by a two-pronged javelin. *Both* thighs impaled by a *single* javelin? Talk about bad luck, almost like spilling coffee on yourself before an important client meeting.

When his squeamish troops recoiled in horror at the gruesome injury, the general, "shuffling his legs backward and forward, broke the shaft of the weapon in the middle, and then ordered each fragment to be drawn out separately." Exactly what you or I would have done, right? Philopoemen's gutsy "problem solving skills" and "leadership agility" rallied his troops to rout the enemy.

So much for the gory heroics. The real leadership lessons involve his *off-battle-field* style.

Here's one example. Whenever marching with his troops, Plutarch tells us, the general, "accustomed himself to march first as they went out, but last as they came back."

Translated for today's workplace: Lead from the front when your team needs you there, for example, when the way forward is particularly uncertain or daunting.

And, conversely, be a leader who also knows when and how to lead “from the back.” And what does that mean? Well, give talented team members their own occasional chances to test and develop their upfront leadership skills. And, accompany your team closely enough to perceive who is falling behind and needs encouragement or clearer direction. *And*, reassure your team that you “have their backs,” that is: Remain vigilant for office politics and the other organizational nonsense that can “ambush” and unsettle a team.

But the general’s greatest leadership lesson emerges from a painting by the renowned Flemish masters, Peter Paul Rubens (d. 1640) and Frans Snyders (d. 1657). In it, a perplexed couple is looking with astonishment at a muscular peasant, who is chopping wood. The servant is apparently helping to prepare a great feast, judging by the lavish, Baroque bounty of game and produce that crowds the canvas.

I was perplexed by the perplexed couple when I first wandered by the painting in the Prado. Why are they gawking at a mere servant with such alarm?

“The Recognition of Philopoemen,” the painting is called. Here’s the backstory, paraphrased from a chronicler: The general was to be honored at a great feast, arrived early, was mistaken for a servant because of his simple attire, and was sent to chop wood. He didn’t protest indignantly but complied uncomplainingly and energetically. The painting captures the moment when the horrified hosts realize that they’ve dispatched their guest of honor to servile labor.

The moral for leaders today? In an era when too many self-glorifying leaders labor in pursuit of fame and honor, the truly great leader labors only in pursuit of the mission to be accomplished. True leaders are not horrified to be mistaken as “someone ordinary,” because such leaders realize that they *are* ordinary people, called upon for a season to extraordinary service as team leader, chief executive, and so on.

During his lifetime, Philopoemen was, “loved surpassingly,” Plutarch tells us. And upon passing, he was hailed as, “the last of the Greeks,” implying that no general so worthy of admiration would ever come along again.

The good news for you and me? Though today’s work environments are undoubtedly demanding, we don’t need to yank javelins from our thighs to be appreciated as leaders.

Rather, team members will be plenty impressed if we lead from the front when needed, have their backs the rest of the time, and manifest a humble commitment to labor alongside the team to deliver the mission.