**Leadership lessons from Genghis Khan**

On one end of the leadership spectrum, there is Machiavelli–conniving, ambitious and ruthless. On the other there is [Cyrus the Great–humble, generous and loyal](http://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanholiday/2012/04/19/9-timeless-leadership-lessons-from-cyrus-the-great/). Along this spectrum of great leaders and motivators, used so often in business books, speeches and anecdotes, there is one unmentionable: [Genghis Khan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genghis_Khan). A man so evil, unwashed and bloodthirsty that he is impossible to learn from.

Or so the efforts to suppress his influence would have us believe. (The USSR, for instance, cleared out Khan's homeland in Mongolia and forbade any mention of him.) But I'm here to tell you that we can learn more about leadership and getting things done from Genghis Khan than just about any other historical figure. Because almost everything you know about him is wrong...

For starters: he abolished torture, embraced religious freedom, united disparate tribes, hated aristocratic privilege, ran his kingdoms meritocratically, loved learning and advanced the rights of women in Mongol society. He was also the greatest conqueror and general who ever lived, ruling a self-made kingdom of nearly 12-million square miles which lasted in parts for nearly seven centuries. (When United States forces captured Baghdad they were the first successful invaders to take the city since Khan.) Yes, he was violent and war-like, but never for its own sake. The [Mongols](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongols) found no honor in fighting–only winning. Victory was their aim and they did whatever it took to get it. Then they focused on building peace with equal intensity. So while other conquerors died violent, early deaths, Khan died an old man surrounded by his loving family.

His great mission was simple yet audacious: "Unite the whole world in one empire." But, as he said, "[Since the] calling is high, the obligations incumbent on me are also heavy." Using the unparalleled biography [***Genghis Khan: and Making of the Modern World***](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0609809644/ryanholnet-20) by Jack Weatherford as our guide, let us see how Khan–in his own words–managed to accomplish this great work and what he felt those obligations were.

**Have An End in Mind**

"For the Mongol warrior, there was no such thing as individual honor in battle if the battle was lost. As Genghis Khan reportedly said, there is no good in anything until it is finished."

**Lead from the Front**

"When it was wet, we bore the wet together, when it was cold, we bore the cold together.”

**Serve a Greater Good Than Yourself**

"[A leader] can never be happy until his people are happy."

**Have a Vision**

"Without the vision of a goal, a man cannot manage his own life, much less the lives of others[...](http://blogs.forbes.com/jessicahagy/)The ancients had a saying: ‘Unity of purpose is a fortune in affliction.’”

**Be Self-Reliant**

"No friend is better than your own wise heart! Although there are many things you can rely on, no one is more reliable than yourself. Although many people can be your helper, no one should be closer to you than your own consciousness. Although there are many things you should cherish, no one is more valuable than your own life.”

**Be Humble**

"The mastery of pride, which was something more difficult, he explained, to subdue than a wild lion. He warned them that, 'If you can't swallow your pride, you can't lead.'"

**Be Moderate**

"I hate luxury. I exercise moderation...It will be easy to forget your vision and purpose one you have fine clothes, fast horses and beautiful women. [In which case], you will be no better than a slave, and you will surely lose everything."

**Understand Your People**

"People conquered on different sides of the lake should be ruled on different sides of the lake."

**Change the World, But Change it Gradually**

"The vision should never stray far from the teaching of the elders. The old tunic fits better and it always more comfortable; it survives the hardships of the bush while the new or untried tunic is quickly torn."

As Weatherford writes, these tenets of leadership did not come to Khan as part of some princely education. He was born poor and illiterate in a world of conflict and strife. He taught himself to be a Khan:

"At no single, crucial moment in his life did he suddenly acquire his genius at warfare, his ability to inspire the loyalty of his followers, or his unprecedented skill for organizing on a global scale. These derived not from epiphanic enlightenment or formal schooling but from **a persistent cycle of pragmatic learning, experimental adaptation and constant revision driven by his uniquely disciplined mind and focused will."**

We can do the same. And we can do it by starting with the example of someone who at first might make us a little uncomfortable. Genghis Khan's reputation precedes him (a brutal pillager who shows no mercy to men, women or children), but that was deliberate. Khan allowed rumors of his atrocities to spread to encourage surrender and cooperation from enemies who might otherwise resist. Putting that aside, we can learn from the Great Khan how to be loyal, how to understand our people, how to induce change and how to have a vision.

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