

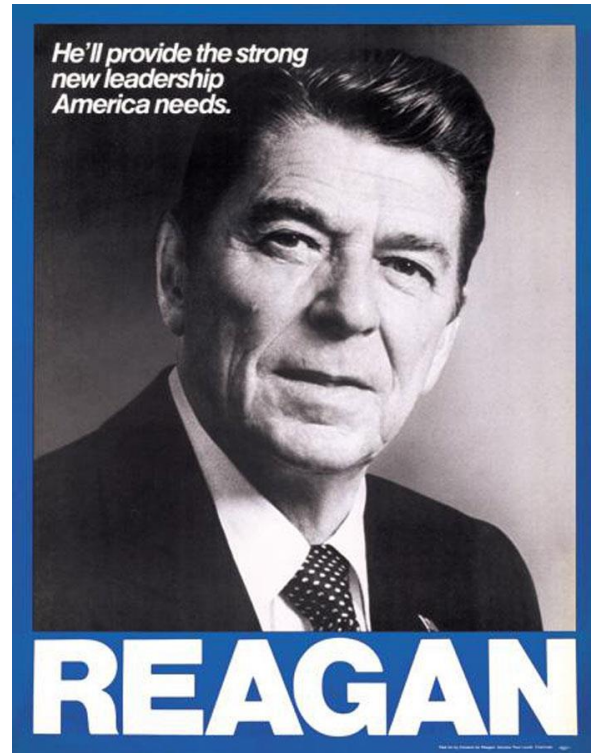
15 Reagan Leadership Lessons

February 6, 2014 By [James Strock](#)

As with other consequential presidents before him, Ronald Reagan is emerging as a historical figure transcending the partisan politics of his time.

Here are 15 top Reagan leadership lessons:

- 1. Craft a Compelling Vision.** This is something we all know—yet few master. Reagan’s vision of individual freedom is the foundation of every aspect of his leadership, throughout his career.
- 2. Optimism.** Durable optimism was a hallmark of Reagan’s leadership. He believed, even in the darkest days, that brighter days lay ahead. This connected him to the young—with whom he had a unique bond as president—and to future generations. His enthusiasm helped restore America’s confidence in herself. Reagan’s understanding of the power of optimism in leadership arose, in part, from his youth during presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt.
- 3. Study Your Part.** Actors study the characters they are asked to inhabit and translate. Ronald Reagan developed his notion of the “role” of leader with Franklin Roosevelt in mind. Young Reagan voted for FDR in each of his four presidential runs. Over time, Reagan’s politics evolved in another direction. He was nonetheless able to look beyond politics and partisanship as he evaluated leadership.
- 4. Communicate a Compelling Vision.** Reagan demurred on being called the “Great Communicator.” He preferred to say that he communicated “great things.” So he did. Polls showed that Americans well understood his top priorities.
- 5. Translate Your Vision Into Management.** Reagan’s clear communication of his vision fostered a supportive culture in the organizations he led. As one former federal appointee recalled, one knew exactly what one’s marching orders were. This empowered people at every level to advance Reagan’s vision.
- 6. Personnel is Central to Management.** Reagan’s presidential administration centralized personnel selection and management to an unprecedented extent. His team’s mantra was: “Personnel is policy.” Paradoxically at first glance, the central supervision of personnel management worked hand-in-glove within an overall approach of decentralizing and delegating authority.



7. **Compromise to Advance Your Goals.** Long before he entered electoral politics, Reagan served as a highly effective labor negotiator. He learned to fight hard for the interests of those he represented—and when to accept a compromise that would be in everyone’s interest. When he was unable to achieve all of his announced goals, he would frame the ultimate agreement in a way that would enable him to return for additional concessions in the future.
8. **Seek Allies.** Some people seek out reasons to disagree with others. Reagan strove to find areas of common ground. He was skilled at building alliances. This included locating shared interests or concerns with people and organizations who might otherwise be viewed as in opposition. He did not hesitate to reach out to those who became “Reagan Democrats.” So, too, he made a point of working with members of his own Republican Party who were not 100% “Reagan Republicans.” The Reagan administration cobbled together an unlikely set of allies in its efforts to turn the tide of the Cold War against the Soviet Union.
9. **Deploy Humor.** Reagan’s use of humor was legendary. He often disarmed foes and critics with a gentle but lethal touch. So, too, he would not hesitate to poke fun at himself. This enabled him to address legitimate, sensitive issues of public concern, such as his advancing age while serving as president.
10. **Maintain Perspective.** Reagan evaded the prideful temptation to conspicuously burn the midnight oil as president. He understood that the tasks only he could undertake—such as top decisions relating to life and death, representing the nation in various capacities—called upon his judgment and perspective. He spent the equivalent of a year of his presidency away from the White House, at his ranch in California. Of course, no president can ever entirely be “off.” Reagan was by no means detached from necessary decision-making, much less idle. He was separated from the day-to-day minutiae, better equipped to keep his eye on the big picture.
11. **Protect Your Health.** The first duty of anyone entrusted with the well-being of others is to safeguard their own health. Reagan was memorably disciplined in terms of diet, exercise, and sleep.
12. **Don’t Be Limited by Others’ Expectations.** They said a professional actor could never be elected president. They said a divorced person could not be elected president. They said he was too old to be elected president. They said he could never reach agreement the Soviet Union to curtail the ruinous arms race. “They” could not faze Ronald Reagan.
13. **Write.** In common with many other effective leaders, Reagan was a serious writer. He had been a professional speaker, as well as an actor, for decades prior to becoming president. Writing required that he think through many, many events and ideas. It enabled him to experiment with various ways to express his observations in the most persuasive way. Writing reinforced his capacity to be engaged in events. At the same time, the focused listening and observation that fuel writing ensured that he was always an outsider, always scanning the larger scene.

14. **Embody Your Vision.** It's often observed that Reagan, the actor, was memorably authentic. His life and work were unified. Reagan strove to convey integrity. He came to embody his vision.

15. **Make It Look Easy.** Reagan believed that part of a professional's code is to "make it look easy." One might usefully recall another adage in this putting this in perspective: *It didn't just happen.*