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# 11 Leadership Lessons from Alexander the Great



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD

**Visionary, team builder, mentor, he shows us some timeless leadership lessons but also some glaring failures.**

Although the **‘Great Man’ theory of leadership** belongs to the scrapheap of history, its allure continues to mystify. Underlying this theory is the assumption that if the right man (yes, it is often assumed to be a man) for the job emerges, he will almost magically take control of a situation and lead a group of people into safety or success. While such leaders are rare, there are times when a singular individual steps out from the crowd and serves as a paragon of leadership.

One such individual was Alexander the Great; one of history’s most famous warriors and a legend of almost divine status in his own lifetime. He falls into the elite category of individuals who changed the history of civilisation and shaped the present world as we know it.

From a leadership perspective, it’s not very difficult to say that Alexander was without peer. He could be magnanimous toward defeated enemies and extremely loyal toward his friends. As a general, he led by example, leading

from the front.

Alexander's reign illustrates a number of important leadership lessons which remain applicable to business and political chiefs today:

### **1. Have a compelling vision**

Alexander's actions demonstrate what can be accomplished when a person is totally focused—when he or she has clarity coupled with a 'magnificent obsession'. Through dramatic gestures and great rhetorical skills, Alexander spoke to the collective imagination of his people and won the commitment of his followers.

### **2. Be unsurpassed in execution**

Alexander not only had a compelling vision, he also knew how to make that vision become reality. By maintaining an excellent information system, he was able to interpret his opponent's motives and was a master at coordinating all parts of his military machine. No other military leader before him ever used speed and surprise with such dexterity. He knew the true value of the statement "One is either quick or one is dead!"

### **3. Create a well-rounded executive team**

Alexander also knew how to build a committed team around him and operated in a way that allowed his commanders to build on each other's strengths.

### **4. Walk the talk**

Alexander set the example of excellence with his leadership style; he led his troops quite literally from the front. When his troops went hungry or thirsty, he went hungry and thirsty; when their horses died beneath them and they had to walk, he did the same. This accessibility only changed when he succumbed to the luxury of Persian court life.

### **5. Encourage innovation**

Alexander realised the competitive advantage of strategic innovation. Because of his deft deployment of troops, his support for and reliance on the creativity of his corps of engineers, and his own logistical acumen, his war machine was the most advanced of its time.

## **6. Foster group identification**

Alexander created a very astute propaganda machine to keep his people engaged. His oratory skills, based on the simple language of his soldiers, had a hypnotic influence on all who heard him. He made extensive use of powerful cultural symbols which elicited strong emotions. These 'meaning-management' actions, combined with his talent for leading by example, fostered strong group identification among his troops, and motivated his men to make exceptional efforts.

## **7. Encourage and support followers**

Alexander knew how to encourage his people for their excellence in battle in ways that brought out greater excellence. He routinely singled people out for special attention and recalled acts of bravery performed by former and fallen heroes, making it clear that individual contributions would be recognised. He also had the ability to be a 'container' of the emotions of his people through empathetic listening.

## **8. Invest in talent management**

Extremely visionary for his time, Alexander spent an extraordinary amount of resources on training and development. He not only trained his present troops but also looked to the future by developing the next generation.

## **9. Consolidate gains**

Paradoxically, three of Alexander's most valuable lessons were taught not through his strengths but through his weaknesses. The first of these is the need to consolidate gains. Alexander failed to put the right control systems in place to integrate his empire and thus never really savoured the fruit of his accomplishments. Conquest may be richly rewarding, but a leader who advances without ensuring the stability of his or her gains stands to lose everything.

## **10. Succession planning**

Another lesson Alexander taught by omission is the need for a viable succession plan. He was so focused on his own role as king and aspiring deity that he could not bring himself to think of the future when he was gone. As a result, political vultures tore his vast empire apart after his death.

## 11. Create mechanisms of organisational governance

The final lesson that the case of Alexander illustrates (again by omission) is the paramount importance of countervailing powers. Leaders have the responsibility to put proper mechanisms of organisational governance into place, using checks and balances to prevent faulty decision-making and the abuse of power.

Alexander began his reign as an enlightened ruler, encouraging participation by his 'companions'—loyal soldiers drawn from the noble families in Macedonia. But like many rulers before him, he became addicted to power. Hubris raised its ugly head. As time passed, Alexander's behaviour became increasingly domineering and grandiose. He tolerated nothing but applause from his audience, so his immediate circle kept their reservations to themselves. As a result he lost touch with reality, another factor leading to his failure to consolidate his empire.

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