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Don't Know Much about Motivation? Look to History.

By John Baldoni

Sometimes you just can't take it anymore. And that's all the motivation you need to get started. Such was the case with Epanimondas in fourth-century BC Greece. Epanimondas was a farmer from Thebes, a member of the yeoman class. His part of Greece, Boeotia, was agricultural and frequently set upon by other more powerful states but according to historian Victor Davis Hanson, Boeotia possessed something very special—democracy. Its warrior neighbor, Sparta, sought to destroy the Boeotian confederacy by invading; it was defeated, but one man realized that this victory would be pyrrhic unless Sparta itself was destroyed. (Sparta had a nasty habit of repeatedly invading its neighbors.) And so Epanimondas, playing up the centuries of Spartan hostility, rallied his fellow farmers to turn the tables on Sparta and invaded it. The farmer soldiers brought Sparta to its knees, accomplishing in three months in the winter of 370–369 what no other Greek state had been able to accomplish in three centuries.

Together We Stand

How Epanimondas unified his people is a shining example of how a leader can rally people together for a common cause. And in the process he demonstrates what it takes to lead, but also what it takes to motivate others. Epanimondas understood, as all good leaders do, that motivation is an internal drive; it cannot be imposed from the outside. Yes, the Spartans were an external threat, but the decision to fight them, to take the war to their homeland, was a personal decision that every soldier under Epanimondas's command had to make. Epanimondas appealed to their values and their desire to take a stand for their people. Democracy was the order of the day; all commanders were elected by their troops. Most important, Epanimondas led by example. He exemplified courage and he shared the hardships with his men (n. 1).

Ultimately motivation emerges from creating conditions where people want to participate in the cause, be it a war of liberation, or a sales drive to reach a stretch goal quota. History teaches us much about motivation. From each leader we learn something different, an approach perhaps, a moment of understanding, but from all great leaders we learn that motivation requires passion for the cause as well as commitment to others. Here are some examples.

George Washington. The Revolutionary War was over; the British had gone home. But the thirteen colonies were still thirteen independent entities. There was much disgruntlement throughout the land, in particular with the officer corps of the former Continental Army. Discontent raged so virulently that there was talk of another rebellion, this time against American authorities. The officers gathered in a church in Newburgh, New York. George Washington arranged to speak to them, and what happened next is the stuff of legend. Washington took to the pulpit of the church and with one gesture brought the audience to heel. As he prepared to read his remarks, Washington pulled out a pair of spectacles, and said, "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles for I have not only grown gray, but also blind in the service of my country. The audience, many of whom had served with the general personally, melted into tears. The talk of rebellion was over (n. 2).

Abraham Lincoln. No man ever sought to avoid war more than he did. But when the South seceded from the Union, President Abraham Lincoln resolved to pull it back together. And after four years of bloody conflict, Lincoln chose the occasion of his Second Inaugural Address in March 1865 to do what he always wanted to do—seek harmony, peace and unity. He concluded his address with these words: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations." Sadly a month later he was assassinated and never was able to see the ultimate peace for which he had labored so hard. But his words of healing set the nation on the right course, even if it took many years to achieve it.

David Hackworth. South Vietnam's Mekong Delta in 1968 was not where anyone, especially a veteran soldier who had already served two tours, would choose to be. But if you were David Hackworth, a career soldier, who had enlisted at 15, it was the place to be. Hack knew his mission: turn a group of ill trained draftee soldiers into a fighting force. And that he did. How? He established simple rules: wear your helmet and keep your weapon clean. Why? Because the helmet would keep you more safe from flying shrapnel and the weapon would serve as your best friend during an attack. More rules would follow but more important was Hack's example. Colonel Hackworth walked point with his men on patrol, taught them how to fight in the thick underbrush and most important was always there to listen, to share and to endure (n. 3).

Lee Iacocca. Remember this line? “If you can find a better car, buy it.” That was a mantra that pulled a company from oblivion in the early 1980s. The auto industry that had built the town into a world class business power by the 1970s was faltering under the weight of competition from abroad it could not understand and such poor quality internally that customers turned away in droves. Such a crisis drove Chrysler, always the weakest of the then Big Three, into bankruptcy. Lee Iacocca rose to the challenge and pulled out all the stops in his salesman’s playbook to persuade Congress to bail his company out, and in the process give it room to make cars for another day. To the surprise of his critics, Iacocca prevailed and became a national icon for the persevering spirit of American business.

Shared Commitment

General. President. Soldier. Businessman. Each of these folks led in his own unique way. Washington led with his physical presence. Lincoln commanded moral authority. Hackworth lived the officer’s mantra: take care of the soldiers. Iacocca persuaded a government and a public to back his product.

What we take away from each of these leaders, as well as all great leaders, is this: a spirit of giving. Leaders must act in ways that are selfless. Yes, they have egos, and so they should—why else would you follow them? But they have to be willing to put themselves and their values on the line for the good of the organization. That’s where the motivation emerges, from watching the leader act for the benefit of all.

Sources

1. Victor Davis Hanson *The Soul of Battle* (New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 1999/2001): 1–122.
2. Joseph J. Ellis *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Random House/Vantage, 2005): 142–43.
3. David H. Hackworth and Eilhys England *Steel My Soldiers’ Hearts* (New York: Rugged Land, 2002) .

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