

Colin Powell—On leadership

General Colin L. Powell
U.S. Army (Ret.)

General Powell regaled us with wonderful stories and anecdotes about his time in the military, as Secretary of State and more recently his time in the private sector. This broad experience has defined his views on leadership and he found that good leadership is as universally applicable (be it the military, private sector, nonprofit or government) as the principles are disarmingly simple.

He began by defining leadership as creating the best environment to get the job done. It hinges, he said, on the interaction between leader and followers, with a focus on the followers. He articulated four key principles.

- 1.** People need a sense of purpose. “Why are we doing what we’re doing?” “How will it help?” Powell spoke about how people need a sense of worth and a mission marked by clear goals. A leader must convey this sense of purpose to his or her employees or soldiers, and it must be communicated with a passion so those you lead will know you have conviction about this objective. A leader must also display moral courage and always act in selfless service to those whom he or she leads.
- 2.** Give those whom you lead what they need to succeed. Take care of them.

- 3.** Recognize performance. This recognition is less about pay raises and bonuses and more about letting employees know what a great job they did. Maybe calling their spouse to let them know about what a great job their spouse did. Infuse this recognition with a human touch. Think about a handwritten “thank you” note.
- 4.** Trust is the bond that holds people together. Build that trust as it will be the foundation upon which people will follow.

Powell concluded by discussing his faith in the future of this country and how we shouldn’t sell ourselves short. We all need to become leaders. He reminded us that we are an immigrant nation, and that each person came here to be an American. This, he said, is what keeps this country alive and will keep us strong.

Finally, Powell talked about the value of hiring those who have served in the military and made an appeal to find ways to hire those wounded in recent wars. He spoke of the qualities of former military personnel that employers would find attractive—discipline, a strong sense of commitment, a sense of duty and responsibility, and a solid value system. He also noted that the military teaches flexibility and constant learning. These qualities, Powell confidently asserted, were the attributes of a great employee that would benefit employers in many ways.