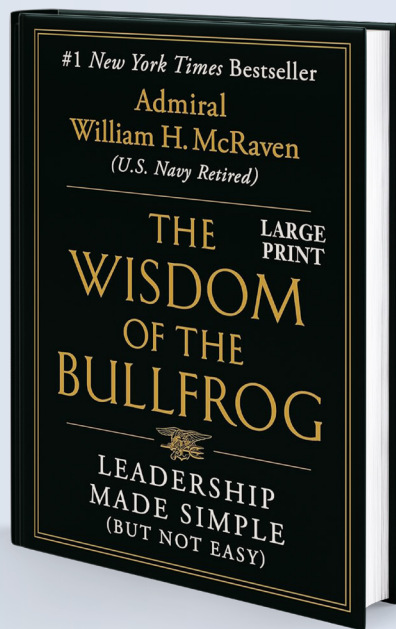


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The Wisdom of the Bullfrog Leadership Made Simple (But Not Easy)

By Admiral William H. McRaven

Admiral William H. McRaven is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of *Make Your Bed* and the New York Times bestsellers *Sea Stories: My Life in Special Operations* and *The Hero Code: Lessons Learned from Lives Well Lived*. In his thirty-seven years as a Navy SEAL, he commanded at every level. As a Four-Star Admiral, his final assignment was as Commander of all U.S. Special Operations Forces. After retiring from the Navy, he served as the Chancellor of the University of Texas System from 2015 to 2018. He now lives in Austin, Texas with his wife, Georgeann.

What Separates the Good from the Truly Great?

In military terms, the bullfrog is “the longest serving frogman and Navy SEAL on active duty.” Admiral William H. McRaven (U.S. Navy Retired), former bullfrog and current chancellor of the University of Texas System, sets out to relay all he has learned about leadership in his book, *The Wisdom of the Bullfrog: Leadership Made Simple (But Not Easy)*. While his book is replete with military stories and lessons McRaven learned while serving the nation in the military, his advice holds for anybody acting in a leadership role in any capacity. His main belief about leadership is that it is a simple endeavor although it is never easy. A true leader, he believes, not only gets a job done but maintains and advances the reputation of his or her institution. McRaven has developed a list of eighteen sayings he encountered throughout his life, and in each of his chapters, he presents the saying, explains it, and gives an example of how he has seen it play out. This is not a step by step guide to becoming a leader or a collection of case studies. Rather, this book goes deeper than that and expounds upon who a leader must be if they are to lead effectively. In many ways, this book is about character and how that character affects not just the individual but all of those around him or her. In short, it is about who a leader must be.

Honor, Trust, and Action

The first phrase McRaven presents is “death before dishonor.” He defines honor as “doing the right thing for the right reasons,” and he believes that people will follow a leader anywhere if they believe he or she is a person of honor. An important part of great leadership, he maintains, is having a code of conduct that can guide a leader through inevitable tough situations. Everyone will make mistakes, but having a code of honor remains paramount to success. McRaven concedes that some unethical people make it to very high positions, but he stands behind his belief that ultimately this behavior will have negative consequences either for the individual or for the organization he or she works for. For McRaven, “Being a person of high integrity is what separates the great leaders from the commonplace.”

“You can’t surge trust” is the next saying McRaven attempts to

live by. He discusses the decision the CIA made to use McRaven's special forces team in their attempt to capture Osama bin Laden, and he explains that the trust involved in this decision was only possible because it had been built over many years. Trust is not something that comes instantly. His way of building trust is to "Show up early. Work hard. Stay late. Have a plan. Deliver on your promises. Share the hardships with the employees. Show that you care. Admit your mistakes." Trust cannot be rushed, but it is essential for competent leadership.

Next McRaven moves on to the task of commanding people with the phrase, "when in command, command." He discusses the story of Admiral Chester Nimitz. Nimitz had been in command of the Decatur when the destroyer ran aground. The incident was so severe that the admiral was given a letter of reprimand for dereliction of duty. Nimitz made mistakes, but he also learned that with great responsibility comes the need to make decisions, and no person will always make the correct decisions. Still, it is the job of a leader to make decisions and take action, nevertheless, and command. This requires the ability to face challenges while also understanding that leaders were chosen for a job because they are good. He writes, "As a leader you must always appear to be in command, even on those days when you struggle with the pressures of the job... You must instill in your men and women a sense of pride that their leader can handle any problem."

What Leaders Must Do

In his next chapter, McRaven, then "the brand-new ensign at Underwater Demolition Team Eleven" was summoned by the Skipper. McRaven was surprised by the summons, and as he made his way to the Skipper, he imagined what honorable task he may be about to be given. When he got to the Skipper, however, he was asked to create a float for a Fourth of July parade. Needless to say, McRaven was disappointed about the task he was given, but through that experience, he learned the next phrase he lives by, "we all have our frog floats." For him, frog floats are tasks that people consider beneath them, and McRaven was taught by his Master Chief that the best thing to do in these situations is to do the absolute best you can. McRaven also learned that "if you [take] pride in the little jobs, people would think you worthy of bigger jobs."

McRaven believes that when difficult situations arise, a leader must go to the source of the problem and be visible and do what needs to be done. This is summed up in his phrase, "run to the sound of the guns." To exemplify this, he discusses the management of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The CEO of the company at the time stayed in London while also downplaying the severity of the incident which was "one of the largest oil spills in the history of the industry." McRaven believes the leaders can sometimes be reticent to go to a problem because coming up with a solution usually requires admitting to being part of the problem. Good leaders, he maintains, "embrace the challenge." Going to the source of the problem presents risks, but it is essential to quality leadership.

"Real leadership," McRaven writes, "is not always about being

the person in charge during an existential crisis.... Sometimes real leadership is just doing the right thing when no one else is. When you take action of your own accord, it sets the tone for the organization." McRaven writes these words as he discusses the Ranger's saying, *Sua Sponte* which means "of your own accord." He acknowledges that it is often hard for leaders to allow those under them to make important decisions. After all, it is often the reputation of the leaders and the whole organization that is on the line. Still, he insists that people must feel empowered and take advantage of that empowerment to do the right thing without needing to be told. McRaven believes that the missteps and mistakes that will sometimes arise because of this is better than fostering an environment of inaction.

Next McRaven goes to discuss the phrase, "who dares wins," and to exemplify this philosophy, he discusses the decision President Barack Obama had to make as to whether to send people into the compound where intelligence believed Osama bin Laden was hiding out. While the intelligence pointed to the fact that he likely was in the building, there was no way to ascertain this for certainty. As such, Obama's reputation as well as the lives of those inside the building and those tasked with going in the building were on the line. Obama believed that troops needed to go in, but he was careful with the process and with the lives in his care as the team on the ground spent weeks of careful training for the mission. Risks must be taken, but they must be carefully considered and managed. McRaven discusses opportunities that the greats in all fields have taken even though they were risky. Some succeed, and some do not, but they were all willing to take a risk, and those who succeeded also spent ample time preparing for the risk. Great leaders, he claims, must be bold but not brash.

"No plan survives first contact with the enemy" is the theme of McRaven's tenth chapter. With these words, McRaven introduces the importance of contingency plans. The military, he explains, goes through many steps to test plans against possible worst case scenarios. This requires time and effort, but he believes this process is absolutely imperative for success because it helps ensure that a team will always be ready for whatever contingencies are thrown their way.

Leadership and Standards

McRaven believes deeply in the need for high standards. Soldiers who desire to be SEALs desire to be the best, and they know that high standards are required of them. This brings forth the saying, "it pays to be a winner," but McRaven believes there is a corollary to that statement and that is that there are downfalls to failing or losing. McRaven tells the story of a night when one of the members of his SEAL team got into a bar fight with some marines. When McRaven pointed out the number of Marines who had acted poorly to Coumatos, the commodore, Coumatos told him that the Marines were young and that he expected more from SEALs. They are held "to a higher standard." McRaven understood that they were held to high standards and that while they sometimes fail to meet these standards, people need to be held accountable for such breaches. He writes, "Everyone wants to be a part of something special. Everyone



People benefit when they know exactly what is expected of them.”

wants to be a valued member of a great organization. And the only way to be a great organization is to set high standards and expect people to live up to those standards.” He believes that people want to be winners and want to be challenged. “Never underestimate” he says, “the value of a stretch goal, of setting the bar high and challenging your employees to clear it.”

When McRaven writes, “A shepherd should smell like his sheep,” he means that a leader should be sharing experiences with those they lead. This includes dangers and camaraderie, and it means listening to stories. In SEAL training, the officers and the enlisted soldiers participate in the same training. There are two key benefits to this, McRaven writes. The first is that the officers get to know the enlisted people and understand what motivates them. The second benefit is that it instills a level of respect in the enlisted soldiers for their officers because they have all gone through Hell Week together. McRaven believes ineffectual leadership will arise when leaders lose touch with those they lead.

Oversight and Communication

To “troop the line” refers to the act whereby a leader inspects his or her military. McRaven believes that daily inspections provide leaders with great insight. When leaders gain this insight, they see what it is that their people need. When people have the resources they need, they feel valued, and this is a large part of having solid morale. This is not something that McRaven just did while in the military. He also troops the line at the University of Texas schools. He finds that there are problems in all organizations in the lower levels that people struggle to overcome and that can make jobs more difficult for those working in these lower roles. Often, however, a leader can quickly make changes that eliminate these struggles, and this can make things better for the whole organization.

This ties in to McRaven’s next phrase “expect what you inspect.” He tells the story of Colonel Bud Sydnor who approached one of his captains and called him out for not inspecting his troops. The captain replied that this is not necessary because everyone there is a professional. To this, Sydnor responded that “if you were a real professional, you would understand the value of an inspection.” While he admits that there is a line between oversight and excessive scrutiny, he maintains that each leader must find a way to walk this line because any organization will become sloppy if people’s work is not inspected. He believes that people benefit when they know exactly what is expected of them.

To illustrate the importance of communication, McRaven discusses a time when he was in ambush training. When the instructors ambushed McRaven and his men, McRaven discovered an opportunity to take his instructors by surprise and wipe them out.

While he thought he would be lauded for his effort and effectiveness, he was not. This is because he failed to communicate what he was doing with his troops whose job it was to listen to McRaven. Instead of leading his people out of the kill zone, he left them without communicating, leading at least one man to believe McRaven was abandoning the group. From this, he learned the invaluable lesson of the importance of communication.

These are many of the lessons and insights McRaven presents in *The Wisdom of the Bullfrog: Leadership Made Simple (But Not Easy)*. These and the other lessons are all hard won from his time in both the military and in the University of Texas system. The chapters of the book are short, often including the narrative telling of an incident and the lesson he learned from that incident as well as an explanation of the phrase the chapter is about and an introductory quote by a notable person elaborating on that chapter’s text. Each chapter ends with a brief list of things for the reader to remember. Because McRaven’s chapters are short, clear, and littered with memorable anecdotes and stories, the lessons can be learned quickly and understood easily. Still, they are lessons meant to guide a life and a career, and because of this, understanding them is far easier than living by them. This ties in with McRaven’s theme that great leadership can be simple but it is not easy. This book will likely appeal to anyone in any position of leadership whether that position be in the upper echelons of the military or in their own homes. After all, as McRaven says, leadership is about honor, and honor is necessary in any well-lived life.

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