



By Steven Arango

Leaders are abundant; good leaders are scarce; great leaders are even rarer. There are countless works dedicated to the study of leadership, providing examples of some of the greatest leaders in history, contrasted with some of the worst. One such account is [*Leadership in War: Essential Lessons from Those Who Made History*](#) by Andrew Roberts, a masterful and succinct take on this genre.

Nevertheless, it can be hard to relate to these figures. Not because their experiences are poorly explained, but more often because the subjects seem mythical or from an era long ago. This article's purpose is to reframe the study of leadership from the distant and abstract, to the immediate and personal. It encourages readers to recognize leaders in their everyday lives, analyze them, and mimic them to confront a growing void in authentic leadership in our society.

In a time when leadership crises permeate our culture, it is worth reflecting on the great leaders we have around us. To be clear, studying prominent leaders throughout history is a necessary and encouraged endeavor. But without reflecting on the leaders present in our own lives, we lose sight of the practical aspects of the discipline in favor of those more theoretical. As a result, we may fall short of our ultimate goal: becoming great leaders ourselves.

An influential leader in my own life is Judge Fernando Rodriguez, Jr., who gave me a unique opportunity to serve as his law clerk. Judge Rodriguez epitomizes the servant leader—one who rallies those around them for a goal greater than self. He demonstrates a quiet

confidence, arguing as if he is right but listening as if he is wrong. He speaks as if every word matters but listens as if yours are more important. He speaks softly, but his actions carry a big stick.

As I worked for him, I noted the following examples of quiet, confident leadership:

Listen, Forgive, and Teach. Judge never raised his voice in any circumstance, nor did he show frustration—even when merited. If there was any internal frustration, it was hidden. Instead, he showed a tolerance for failure, an expectation for success, and a desire to teach. These maxims were not only applied to his employees but to all who entered his courtroom, including himself.

Take Your time, Get it Right, and Be Okay with Saying “I Don’t Know”. Judge handled cases across the legal spectrum—from immigration to admiralty. He’s well-versed in more case law than you can imagine. And for the cases where he was unfamiliar, he quickly became fluent in the legal and factual issues. Even though he was by far the most prepared person in the room, he was never afraid to humble himself when he was unsure of an answer or needed more time to consider an issue.

Everything You Do Matters; Everyone Matters More. Judge received hundreds of letters from defendants and their families supporting a more lenient prison sentence. Most letters followed the same pattern: explaining to Judge why a crime was committed, the support their family offered, and asking for leniency. Judge read every letter. It didn’t matter if the letter was poorly written on a napkin or artfully paralleled [The Odyssey](#) in length and complexity—he considered each fully. Performance of this task was not born out of obligation, but a sense of duty to each individual who wrote these letters. He believed each person contained intrinsic value and deserved his time and effort.

Compassion. One particular example of his leadership overshadows the rest. Judge had been working on a tough case, one with convoluted facts that provided little, if any, margin of error. As he finalized his order, Thanksgiving was only a few days away. Before issuing the order, however, he reflected on his task; should he issue it before Thanksgiving and possibly ruin the family’s holiday? Or should he hold the opinion and risk increasing the family’s anxiety and anticipation? After discussing the issue, he decided (and I believe rightly) to hold the order until after Thanksgiving. He was constantly aware of the suffering his decisions could cause in others and was ready to relieve that pain as best he could. True leaders must mimic that approach.

Leadership positions can breed ego and suppress humility. This reality is reinforced by the

fact that society rarely notices the every-day leader, individuals who change the world and their communities for the better—incrementally. Instead, society often focuses on the wholesale change caused by the Thatchers or Lincolns of the world. But we forget that a leader's true purpose is to create lasting, positive change, and that scale matters not.

To be sure, we must study the great leaders of history. But we cannot forget the great leaders closest to us who have directly impacted our lives, even if only in small ways. No matter the scope of their influence, we can learn from them, apply their maxims, and inspire others to do the same.

1st Lt Steven Arango recently completed a one-year clerkship with U.S. District Judge Fernando Rodriguez, Jr. in the Southern District of Texas. In a couple weeks, he will return to active duty in the Marine Corps and attend The Basic School. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Marine Corps, Department of the Navy, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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