

'A leader leads, a boss drives'



With the assassination of President McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt became the 26th and youngest president in the nation's history at age 42. From 1901 to 1909, he brought excitement to the presidency, as he vigorously led the Republican Party, Congress and the public toward progressive reforms. He is famous for his exuberant personality.

"T.R." felt that the president, as a steward of the people, should take whatever action necessary for the public good, such as the expansion of national parks to conserve wild lands. "I did not usurp power," he wrote, "but I did greatly broaden the use of executive power."

EL: So much of leadership is action, and you are a man of action.

TR: I put myself in the way of things happening, and they happened.

EL: Do you have any special way of defining a leader?

TR: People ask the difference between a leader and a boss. The leader works in the open, and the boss under cover. The leader leads, and the boss drives.

EL: You are famous for a passage that criticizes critics.

TR: The critic is of secondary importance. In the end, progress is made by people who do things.

EL: Would you be so kind as to recite the whole passage?

TR: It's not the critic who counts. It's not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled. Credit belongs to he who is in the arena, his face marred by dust, sweat, and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs to come short and short again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming. It is the man who strives to do the deeds, who knows the great enthusiasm and knows the great devotion, who spends himself on a worthy cause, who at best knows in the end the triumph of great achievement. And who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and cruel souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

EL: How would you define teamwork?

TR: The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people.

EL: How would you describe ethical leadership?

TR: Knowing what's right doesn't mean much unless you do what's right. In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing. The worst thing you can do is nothing.

EL: Do you worry about our moral leadership?

TR: If there is one tendency, more than any other, that is unhealthy and undesirable, it is the tendency to glorify “smartness,” unaccompanied by moral accountability. We will never make our country what it should be until we understand and practice the belief that success is abhorrent if attained by sacrificing what’s right.

EL: What do you do in a crisis?

TR: When you’re at the end of your rope, tie a knot and hold on.

EL: Describe good execution.

TR: The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good people who can get the job done, and the self-restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it.

EL: What is your bottom-line advice to those who want to become leaders?

TR: Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

Sources: The White House, Wikipedia, GoodReads.