

# Leadership Lessons from Dr. Roberts: A Deep Dive into the Nature of Great Leadership

**Dr. Roberts**, a renowned historian, shared his insights into what makes a great leader during an eight-hour lecture series. He delved into the attributes of historical figures, their strategies, and the challenges they faced. This blog post highlights the key ideas, major takeaways, and some of the best quotes from Dr. Roberts, offering valuable lessons for anyone aspiring to leadership.

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## Introduction: Understanding Leadership

### Key Questions Explored:

- What makes a leader great?
- How important are oratory skills, vision, and ruthlessness in leadership?
- Can leaders have friends, and how does that influence their decision-making?
- Is leadership a trait one is born with, or can it be developed?

*"How can one person lead a hundred?" – This question, asked during Dr. Roberts' Cambridge entrance exam in 1981, has shaped his lifelong inquiry into leadership.*

### Dr. Roberts' Approach:

- He emphasizes that the series does not rank the *greatest* leaders but focuses on those he has personally researched.
- The lessons drawn are relevant to everyday leadership, not just wartime leaders.

## Are Leaders Born or Made?

A recurring theme in Dr. Roberts' lecture is whether leaders are born with innate qualities or shaped by their experiences.

*"No, nobody, in my view, is born to greatness... But the idea that you're just marked out at birth for greatness is an incorrect idea, in my view, anyhow."*

### The Role of Destiny

#### Belief in Destiny:

- Figures like **Napoleon** and **Churchill** believed they were chosen for greatness, which endowed them with confidence.
- Dr. Roberts warns, however, that this belief can be dangerous. He uses the example of **Adolf Hitler**, who believed his survival of a bomb plot was a sign of divine favor.

#### Key Insight:

- **Self-confidence** derived from a sense of destiny can be beneficial, but **hard work, discipline, and circumstances** play significant roles in shaping a leader's path.

### Case Study: Pericles of Athens

**Pericles** serves as an exemplary case for studying leadership. He was a *strategos* (military leader) in **Athens** and a key figure during the city's golden age.

#### Achievements of Pericles

- Transformed the **Delian League** into an Athenian Empire.
- Advanced **democratic values**, ensuring citizens had access to public office.
- Promoted **grand strategy**, like building the **long walls** from Athens to its seaport, effectively turning the city into an island for strategic advantage.

*"He was able to tell the people things they didn't want to hear and to persuade them."*

### **Key Strengths:**

- **Strategic Insight:** Built defenses and expanded Athenian influence.
- **Oratory Skills:** Persuaded the Athenian populace even when decisions were unpopular.
- **Visionary Leadership:** Balanced military ambition with civic pride and democracy.

### **The Importance of Oratory**

Dr. Roberts highlights the power of oratory in leadership:

*"Oratory... is the way that a leader can speak directly to the hearts of the people. It hasn't really, in that sense, changed tremendously much in the last 2,000 years."*

### **Lessons for Modern Leaders:**

- Effective communication can win over a crowd, inspire action, and reinforce trust.
- While some great leaders, like **Napoleon**, were not known for their speaking abilities, being an articulate speaker is a significant advantage.

### **The Role of Ruthlessness**

Leadership often requires difficult decisions, especially in times of conflict.

*"He was not a ruthless individual, but he could be ruthless at times... it was in the context of a war and general wartime conditions that were extremely ruthless."*

### **Examples of Pericles' Tough Decisions:**

- The **massacre of Chalcis** and the expulsion of its people.
- Settling **Athenian colonists** on the land of defeated rivals.

**Takeaway: Ruthlessness** is sometimes necessary for achieving strategic goals, but it should not define a leader's character. A balance is needed to maintain respect and loyalty.

### **The Inner Circle: Importance of Advisors**

Dr. Roberts stresses the significance of a leader's **inner circle**:

*"What great leaders need is people that they can bounce ideas off... You want people who you've known for a long time who are genuinely friendly, who've come up with you, and who you know are going to tell you the truth."*

#### **Why It Matters:**

- **Avoiding Yes-Men:** Leaders must surround themselves with advisors who provide honest feedback, not sycophants.
- **Sharpening Ideas:** Constructive criticism helps refine strategies, leading to better decision-making.
- **Examples in History:** Leaders like **Churchill** and **Pericles** appointed advisors who would challenge them, strengthening their positions.

### **The Balance Between Conviction and Popularity**

One of the central challenges of leadership is balancing **personal conviction** with **public opinion**:

*"Pericles was a prime example of a statesman telling the people what they didn't want to hear and persuading them to follow his policy, which later turns out to be the correct one."*

**Key Insights:**

- Leaders must sometimes go against public sentiment to pursue what they believe is right.
- This requires **courage** and the ability to **communicate a vision** effectively.
- Dr. Roberts emphasizes the danger of leaders who rely solely on public approval, as it can lead to **weak decision-making**.

### **Legacy of Pericles: A Lesson in Democratic Leadership**

Pericles' most famous speech, his **Funeral Oration**, delivered in 431 BC, exemplifies his leadership philosophy and vision for Athens.

*"Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. Our government does not copy our neighbors, but it is an example to them."*

#### **Why This Matters:**

- It highlights the **value of democracy** and **citizen participation** in governance.
- Pericles believed in **equality of opportunity**, emphasizing that a man's merit should determine his role in society.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Learning from the Greats**

Dr. Roberts provides a compelling perspective on leadership, emphasizing that:

- **Great leaders are made** through experience, discipline, and an openness to criticism.
- **Self-doubt is vital**—it keeps leaders grounded, but once a decision is made, they must show **unwavering confidence**.
- The **qualities of ancient leaders** like Pericles still resonate today, offering timeless lessons for those in positions of power.

*"If you don't have any [self-doubt] at all, then you are obviously not being very well advised... Doubt yourself as much as you need until such time as you have to decide."*

As modern leaders and aspiring visionaries, we can learn from these historical examples, adapting their lessons to the challenges of our time.

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### **Recommended Reading**

If you want to delve deeper into the topics discussed, Dr. Roberts recommends reading **Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War***:

*"It has a universal impact, and that's why I do recommend people to read it."*

#### **Final Thought:**

*The essence of great leadership is a blend of vision, humility, and the courage to act against the odds. Let us take these lessons to heart as we navigate our own journeys of leadership.*