

This site uses cookies. By continuing to browse the site you are agreeing to our use of cookies.

[I CONSENT TO COOKIES](#)

[MORE INFORMATION](#)



**Bloomberg
Government**

[SIGN IN](#)



Thought Leadership, Voices

Grassroots Leadership Lessons from the Founders



July 3, 2018

[Amy Showalter](#)

Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.

When contemplating how to improve your advocacy results, it's always wise to reflect on immutable advocacy truths—those principles that, regardless of time and season, do not change. This time of year, it's wise to remember the paragons of grassroots advocacy, the Founding Fathers, and how they led their troops and the public through the vicissitudes of the Revolution. My [2016 column on this topic](#) showcased the grassroots leadership qualities of public commitment, grit, sacrificial leaders, and recognizing your "stars." Those are some characteristics we can all display for increased advocacy success. But, as the saying goes, "But, wait, there's more!"

When we dig further into the wonderful stories of the American Revolution, there's an abundance of excellent leadership examples that we should emulate in our grassroots leadership roles. I believe this is more important than ever in our noisy world. There are many compelling causes, but people will stay with your cause for compelling leaders. Sitting at your desk pushing buttons is not leadership, but I digress. The over-reliance on advocacy tools has created a declivity in the expression of grassroots leadership; stakeholders are expected to follow because they pay dues or get a paycheck, and that's not leadership, it's coercion. You need to get your advocates attention, allegiance and followership. You need to lead.

Here are just a few more of the Founding Father's lessons on leadership.

Be a Talent Scout

We often forget that the Colonies were not united in the movement to revolt against England. Just like you, they had to convince those who would benefit from the results of their grassroots activism to join the team.

They knew that they needed someone who could inspire the public, rather than coerce them to join the Revolution. One of the definitions of “inspiration” is that it is “God -breathed;” it’s divine; it’s internally generated, with a little help, as the Founders knew, from some inspiring words.

Thomas Paine held a variety of jobs in England. He wasn’t a great businessman and had trouble connecting with other people. However, he could, like Thomas Jefferson, “write with both hands.” While in London, Benjamin Franklin saw his abilities. He wrote letters of introduction for Paine to various American periodical editors.

In 1774, Paine came to America. He was compelled to generate enthusiasm for the cause of independence, writing: “When the country into which I had just set my foot was set on fire about my ears, it was time to stir,” he said. Franklin suggested that Paine write an independence-themed pamphlet.

Paine finished the draft and suggested that it be entitled *Common Sense*. It sold out in less than two weeks in Philadelphia, and within three months it sold more than 120,000 copies throughout the colonies. In the next two years, it would sell more than half a million copies around the world. It was published anonymously because Paine knew that he was committing an act of treason. Nevertheless, he donated all his royalties to the Second Continental Congress to do with as they wished, not taking a cent for his work.

Would the colonies have been inspired to fight and join the cause without Benjamin Franklin seeing and directing Paine’s writing gift?

Take the Founder’s Test: Are you a talent scout? Do you look for volunteers who have special talents or abilities that can help propel your advocacy? Do you encourage them to use their gifts for your cause?

Be Self-Aware

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were two of the five individuals that Congress appointed to draft the Declaration of Independence. John Adams asked Jefferson to take the lead in writing the Constitution, giving him three reasons: "Reason first, you're a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second, I'm obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third, you can write 10 times better than I can."

"Well," responded Jefferson, "If you are decided, I will do as well as I can." Adams knew what he could and couldn't do. He was pragmatic and humble. He admitted that Jefferson was the better writer and gave him the responsibility to draft the Declaration. Without the eloquence, clarity and rhythm of those words, would the Declaration inspired so many for hundreds of years across cultures and countries?

Take the Founder's Test: Are you self-aware? Do you know what you're good at? Do you know why you're good? Do you know what you are *not* good at? Don't insist upon laboring through tasks that others can perform at a higher level.

Lead by Wandering Around

You're probably familiar with the MBWA (Management by Wandering Around) philosophy espoused by Tom Peters and Robert J. Waterman in their book, *In Search of Excellence*. It's simply a process of stepping out and interacting with those you lead via human contact. George Washington figured this out long before Peters and Waterman.

"To form just an idea, it would be necessary to be on the spot."

-George Washington, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, February 16, 1778

He was “on the spot” for virtually the entire eight-year duration of the American Revolution. During one six-year stretch, he never returned to his home in Virginia.

A cornerstone of his natural leadership style was simply to travel with the troops. He felt that he had no other option than to lead by example from the front. In August of 1776, he awoke to cannon fire on Long Island. He mounted a horse and rode along the lines of troops encouraging men and reminding them what they were fighting for. Just before the enemy attacked, Washington shouted to his men: “If I see any man turn his back today, I will shoot him through. I have two pistols loaded. But, I will not ask any man to go further than I do. I will fight as long as I have a leg or an arm.” The fate that day was more than 1,000 men captured, and Washington lamented what great fellows he lost that day, but he wasn’t deterred from riding to the sound of the guns again and again.

Take the Founder’s Test: Do you “ride to the sound of the guns,” or primarily engage when there is only good news to share? Do you get in the field with your troops? Are you intentional about proactively engaging with them beyond asking them to contact a lawmaker, give to your PAC, or recruit new advocates? How often do you reach out to get their opinions on your operations, communications or events?



Bloomberg
Government

 TWITTER |  LINKEDIN |  FACEBOOK

© 2018 BGOV LLC. All rights reserved. [Privacy](#) and [Terms](#)