

Five Leadership Lessons General McChrystal Forgot

Until Wednesday afternoon, General Stanley McChrystal was the top commander of American forces in Afghanistan. Today, he is the former top commander, mostly because he forgot several important lessons of leadership. Each of them applies to you as a partner, executive, leader or manager in your company.

1. You're never off duty. It is the luxury of your employees to punch out intellectually and culturally after 5:00 p.m. (although it's not the best choice). You don't have that luxury. You must remember that you always represent not only your organization, but your position in the organization. That requires a certain level of decorum that you can never, ever diminish with poor conduct.
2. You might hang out with your team after work, but you're not one of them. If your employees choose to have a few beers at happy hour, more power to them. As a leader, you can and should go on occasion. But have one drink if you're a drinker; never have more than one. You set a bad example and your inhibitions and discipline are put at risk.
3. If you want to criticize your superiors or your partners, do it face to face. Ultimately, this forgotten lesson was probably the deal killer for McChrystal. He chose to unleash his opinions about too many people in foreign governments and in our own. That he did it with a reporter present only magnified the error in judgment. If you have something critical to say, always say it in private to those who can do something constructive with your criticism. That's either the person himself or that person's superior. To criticize mindlessly just makes you look weak.
4. Don't complain about your job to anybody, except maybe your spouse. Nobody else really cares, anyway. And you never know who's listening. A reporter, perhaps.
5. Two ears, one mouth. Use proportionately. The most effective leaders listen more than they talk. Maybe it's so they can learn and observe, or maybe it's a defensive tactic. Either way, listening is more useful than talking.

It's not that Gen. McChrystal is ignorant. He simply failed to muster the discipline for which the military is well known. He forgot what he had been taught. Anyone in a leadership position would do well to reflect and, with luck, learn from McChrystal's mistakes.