

Genghis Kahn and Principles of Leadership

We stand corrected. That was after having carelessly made the assertion that no foreign power had successfully occupied Afghanistan since Alexander the Great. Now, “standing corrected” is the problem of being a dilettante in front of a smart guy like Prof. Peter Dutton at the U.S. Naval War College. “Nope,” he said. “Genghis Kahn did it, too.” Then he told us to read Jack Weatherford’s *Genghis Kahn and the Making of the Modern World*, so we did. And what a pleasure!



Yeah, Genghis Kahn was ruthless. He was ruthless like Julius Caesar, Napoleon and, of course, Alexander the Great; though he may have been **more adept** at parlaying his bloodthirsty reputation into bloodless victories when he could. In any event, Genghis Kahn was their peer as a leader and a visionary – and easily as worthy of study.

There are plenty of things to learn from him. Here are a few:

- **Be a borg.** If you’ve ever seen a takeover in which the acquiring management team acted like they had nothing to learn from the acquiree – then you’ve seen what Genghis Kahn would never do. When he conquered a people, he still sought to learn from them. He studied – and adopted – their best war fighting practices, their technology, their culture. Like the Borg of Star Trek, Mongolians under Genghis Kahn became practically unbeatable by absorbing the best of every civilization they encountered, subjugating more people and more land in 25 years than the Roman army did in 400 years.
- **Reward results.** Genghis Kahn swept away centuries of feudalism and aristocratic hierarchy. It’s amazing how he rose above his own culture in which lineage equaled privilege, and created an empire in which even the lowest citizen could become wealthy and powerful,



based on his or her (yes, women, too) individual achievement and loyalty. His kingdom was a meritocracy that wasted no talent.

- **Hold all to a high standard.** At a time when “rule of law” was largely unknown – rulers *were* the law – Genghis Kahn held all subjects to the same standards. Even the most powerful rulers under him were held to the same standards as the ordinary citizen.

The list goes on. Seth Godin recently commented that, when you don't have a mentor handy to learn from, pick a hero. We don't know if Genghis Kahn qualifies as a hero, but he certainly goes on the someone-to-learn-from list. Do you know of **someone else, maybe unexpected**, who goes on that list?

