

# Five Leadership Lessons From James T. Kirk

Captain James T. Kirk is one of the most famous Captains in the history of the Starfleet. There's a good reason for that. He saved the planet Earth several times, stopped the Doomsday Machine, helped negotiate peace with the Klingon Empire, kept the balance of power between the Federation and the Romulan Empire, and even managed to fight Nazis. On his five year mission commanding the U.S.S. Enterprise, as well as subsequent commands, James T. Kirk was a quintessential leader, who led his crew into the unknown and continued to succeed time and time again.

Kirk's success was no fluke either. His style of command demonstrates a keen understanding of leadership and how to maintain a team that succeeds time and time again, regardless of the dangers faced. Here are five of the key leadership lessons that you can take away from Captain Kirk as you pilot your own organization into unknown futures.

## 1. Never Stop Learning

*"You know the greatest danger facing us is ourselves, an irrational fear of the unknown. But, there's no such thing as the unknown – only things temporarily hidden, temporarily not understood."*

Captain Kirk may have a reputation as a suave ladies man, but don't let that exterior cool fool you. Kirk's reputation at the Academy was that of a "walking stack of books," in the words of his former first officer, Gary Mitchell. And a passion for learning helped him through several missions. Perhaps the best demonstration of this is in the episode "Arena," where Kirk is forced to fight a Gorn Captain in single combat by advanced beings. Using his own knowledge and materials at hand, Kirk is able to build a rudimentary shotgun, which he uses to defeat the Gorn.

If you think about it, there's no need for a 23<sup>rd</sup> Century Starship Captain to know how to mix and prepare gunpowder if the occasion called for it. After all, Starfleet officers fight with phasers and photon torpedoes. To them, gunpowder is obsolete. But the same drive for knowledge that drove Kirk to the stars also caused him to learn that bit of information, and it paid off several years later.

In the same way, no matter what your organization does, it helps to never stop learning. The more knowledge you have, the more creative you can be. The more you're able to do, the more solutions you have for problems at your disposal. Sure, you might never have to face down a reptilian alien on a desert planet, but you never know what the future holds. Knowledge is your best key to overcoming whatever obstacles are in your way.

## 2. Have Advisors With Different Worldviews

*“One of the advantages of being a captain, Doctor, is being able to ask for advice without necessarily having to take it.”*

Kirk’s closest two advisors are Commander Spock, a Vulcan committed to a philosophy of logic, and Dr. Leonard McCoy, a human driven by compassion and scientific curiosity. Both Spock and McCoy are frequently at odds with each other, recommending different courses of action and bringing very different types of arguments to bear in defense of those points of view. Kirk sometimes goes with one or the other, or sometimes takes their advice as a springboard to developing an entirely different course of action.

However, the very fact that Kirk has advisors who have a different worldview not only from each other, but also from himself, is a clear demonstration of Kirk’s confidence in himself as a leader. Weak leaders surround themselves with yes men who are afraid to argue with them. That fosters an organizational culture that stifles creativity and innovation, and leaves members of the organization afraid to speak up. That can leave the organization unable to solve problems or change course. Historically, this has led to some serious disasters, such as *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.

Organizations that allow for differences of opinions are better at developing innovation, better at solving problems, and better at avoiding groupthink. We all need a McCoy and a Spock in our lives and organizations.

### **3. Be Part of the Away Team**

*“Risk is our business. That’s what this starship is all about. That’s why we’re aboard her.”*

Whenever an interesting or challenging mission came up, Kirk was always willing to put himself in harm’s way by joining the Away Team. With his boots on the ground, he was always able to make quick assessments of the situation, leading to superior results, at least, superior for everyone with a name and not wearing a red shirt. Kirk was very much a hands on leader, leading the vanguard of his crew as they explored interesting and dangerous situations.

When you’re in a leadership role, it’s sometimes easy to let yourself get away from leading Away Team missions. After all, with leadership comes perks, right? You get the nice office on the higher floor. You finally get an assistant to help you with day to day activities, and your days are filled with meetings and decisions to be made, and many of these things are absolutely necessary. But it’s sometimes easy to trap yourself in the corner office and forget what life is like on the front lines. When you lose that perspective, it’s that much harder to understand what your team is doing, and the best way to get out of the problem. What’s more, when you’re not involved with your team, it’s easy to lose their trust and have them gripe about how you don’t understand what the job is like.

This is a lesson that was actually imprinted on me in one of my first jobs, making pizzas for a franchise that doesn't exist anymore. Our general manager spent a lot of time in his office, focused on the paperwork and making sure that we could stay afloat on the razor-thin margins we were running. But one thing he made sure to do, every day, was to come out during peak times and help make pizza. He didn't have to do that, but he did. The fact that he did so made me like him a lot more. It also meant that I trusted his decisions a lot more. In much the same way, I'm sure, as Kirk's crew trusted his decisions, because he knew the risks of command personally.

#### **4. Play Poker, Not Chess**

*"Not chess, Mr. Spock. Poker. Do you know the game?"*

In one of my all-time favorite Star Trek episodes, Kirk and his crew face down an unknown vessel from a group calling themselves the "First Federation." Threats from the vessel escalate until it seems that the destruction of the Enterprise is imminent. Kirk asks Spock for options, who replies that the Enterprise has been playing a game of chess, and now there are no winning moves left. Kirk counters that they shouldn't play chess – they should play poker. He then bluffs the ship by telling them that the Enterprise has a substance in its hull called "corbomite" which will reflect the energy of any weapon back against an attacker. This begins a series of actions that enables the Enterprise crew to establish peaceful relations with the First Federation.

I love chess as much as the next geek, but chess is often taken too seriously as a metaphor for leadership strategy. For all of its intricacies, chess is a game of defined rules that can be mathematically determined. It's ultimately a game of boxes and limitations. A far better analogy to strategy is poker, not chess. Life is a game of probabilities, not defined rules. And often understanding your opponent is a much greater advantage than the cards you have in your hand. It was knowledge of his opponent that allowed Kirk to defeat Khan in Star Trek II by exploiting Khan's two dimensional thinking. Bluffs, tells, and bets are all a big part of real-life strategy. Playing that strategy with an eye to the psychology of our competitors, not just the rules and circumstances of the game can often lead to better outcomes than following the rigid lines of chess.

#### **5. Blow Up the Enterprise**

*"All I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by.' You could feel the wind at your back in those days. The sounds of the sea beneath you, and even if you take away the wind and the water it's still the same. The ship is yours. You can feel her. And the stars are still there, Bones."*

One recurring theme in the original Star Trek series is that Kirk's first love is the Enterprise. That love kept him from succumbing to the mind-controlling spores in "This Side of Paradise," and it's hinted that his love for the ship kept him from forming any real relationships or starting a family. Despite that love, though, there came a point in Star Trek III: The Search For Spock, where Captain Kirk made a decision that must have

pained him enormously – in order to defeat the Klingons attacking him and save his crew, James Kirk destroyed the Enterprise. The occasion, in the film, was treated with the solemnity of a funeral, which no doubt matched Kirk's mood. The film ends with the crew returning to Vulcan on a stolen Klingon vessel, rather than the Enterprise. But they returned victorious.

We are often, in our roles as leaders, driven by a passion. It might be a product or service, it might be a way of doing things. But no matter how much that passion burns within us, the reality is that times change. Different products are created. Different ways of doing things are developed. And there will come times in your life when that passion isn't viable anymore, a time when it no longer makes sense to pursue your passion. When that happens, no matter how painful it is, you need to blow up the Enterprise. That is, change what isn't working and embark on a new path, even if that means having to live in a Klingon ship for a while.

### **Final Takeaway:**

In his many years of service to the Federation, James Kirk embodied several leadership lessons that we can use in our own lives. We need to keep exploring and learning. We need to ensure that we encourage creativity and innovation by listening to the advice of people with vastly different opinions. We need to occasionally get down in the trenches with the members of our teams so we understand their needs and earn their trust and loyalty. We need to understand the psychology of our competitors and also learn to radically change course when circumstances dictate. By following these lessons, we can lead our organizations into places where none have gone before.

***“I Am Only One, But Still I Am One. I Cannot Do Everything, But Still I Can Do Something. ~ Helen Keller***

In fall 1962 as the United States and Soviet Union raced to establish nuclear superiority, a Soviet physicist grew increasingly troubled. If the USSR went forward with a scheduled atmospheric test of the bomb he had helped design, he believed it would accelerate the arms race and shower deadly fallout on hundreds of thousands of civilians. Desperate, the physicist called Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev and implored him to stop the test; Khrushchev said he'd see about postponing. The next day, the test occurred as planned. When he learned what had happened, physicist Andrei Sakharov later wrote, “I dropped my face on the table and wept.”

And then he acted. The onetime “father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb became a trailblazing political activist, advocating for nuclear disarmament and human rights. In 1975, Sakharov’s work earned him the Nobel Peace Prize; in the early and mid 1980’s, it earned arrest and exile. By the time he died in 1989, his impassioned dissent had sparked the democracy movement that brought down the Soviet Union two years later. In his Nobel acceptance speech, Sakharov called others to the relentless advocacy he had embraced. “We must fight for every individual person against injustice,” he declared, “Our future depends on this.”

ATHENA leaders become fierce advocates because they simply cannot do other wise. They are that passionately and personally devoted to advancing what they believe. They refuse to be distracted by opponents or doubters; with their moral compass in one hand and their action plan in the other, they stay on the straight line toward their goal. That unswerving commitment to their beliefs drives their actions. More, it compels them to rally support, to fire up others to act along with them. Followers and partners are drawn to leaders for many reasons, but the magnetism and power of advocacy certainly is one of them. The ATHENA leader’s strength as a nurturer, learner, creator and relationship builder is fortified with the steel of an advocate.

Fierce Advocacy, when tempered by respect and compassion for others, generates a potent force for good. It is an inner fire, fed not just by the accomplishment of individual tasks or small victories but by a grander design. The ATHENA advocate dreams dreams that can transform, big enough to hold the fluidity of life, open enough to admit fallibility, yet unwavering in their drive toward a better world.

Authenticity can be defined as “owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, preferences, or beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to know oneself” and behaving in accordance with the true self (S. Harter, 2002: 382).

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***“Leadership is all about unlocking the potential in others.” — Carly Fiorina, Hewlett-Packard CEO***

There are too many so called “leaders” who act and sound artificial, “phony” when they interact with their staff, friends and even customers. When you demonstrate, through thought, word and deed that you’re an authentic human being and leader who really cares about your employees and the organization, the chances are great that you’ll get your employees, friends, and yes, your family’s best efforts. Simply stated, you must walk the talk, **not talk the talk**. Here are a few tips:

**Adhere to your core principles.** In my 30 plus years experiences as a supervisor, manager, speaker, Christian educator, servant, mother, daughter, caregiver and volunteer, I’ve learned that being authentic is the best and most effective way to lead. You must have credibility with your employees, family, friends, clients and your audience. The greatest people and leaders I’ve known said what they meant and meant what they said. They were unambiguous about their dreams, passions, goals and core principles. They were consistent in their beliefs and never wavered; they were trusted and trustworthy.

Money, power and fame are a two-edged sword. They can **‘buy’ access** to persons, places and things you might not otherwise have and enjoy. But, as with most things in life, they often come with a price. Money, power and fame can’t buy you health, happiness, integrity, peace, respect, true friends or authenticity. When you place most of your values in them, people are often thrust-off the foundation of the core values that helped them get to the ‘top.’ We’re born with free will and life is all about choices. Therefore, choose the right path — to remain true and authentic to you first, then others.

**It starts at the top.** When leaders are authentic, that often leads to trust. A Maritz Research poll in 2011 showed that just 7% of U.S. workers viewed leadership’s actions as consistent with their words. “We need our people to be engaged, trusted, leaders,” said Lynn Lieber, a San Francisco-based employment lawyer and legal advisor to compliance training advisor Workplace

Answers. **“You see companies like Apple where people had huge amounts of trust in their leaders.”**

**Establish panels or “your inner circle”.** Bill George former CEO of medical device maker Medtronic calls them True North Groups. They’re small groups of people who know each other well enough to offer objective and honest opinions. They act as a sounding board for each member. “The people trust each other and are willing to be open,” George said. **His group helped him realize he had drifted away from his core values when he was in line to become CEO at Honeywell International.**

**Focus inward.** George said leaders must be introspective about how they function and operate. He meditates twice a day. You can write a journal or talk to someone close to you. Or, do all three. **Think about ‘who’ you are...really;** where you’re going; how you’ll get there; who’ll be on your team. The process you choose can give you time to reflect on how your core values affect the decisions you make, “If you go, go, go all the time, you’re not real grounded,” he said.

**Demonstrate that you care.** Employees, friends and family will see you and think of you as genuine if you prove by words and actions that you care about their well-being. Write thank you notes to your staff, friends and hosts. It’s probably the most important and well-received praise they can receive. Thank you notes are a lost art. We’ve become too reliant on technology. When you take the time to write a note, address it, seal it, put postage on it and deliver it to the Post Office that sends a subtle, but important message that you do care. **Thank you notes are another way that you should do business. Teach it and demonstrate it in the home, it will transfer to the office.**

**Spread the wealth.** Not only financial rewards but praise and credit when and where it’s due. Steve Jobs did it with his resignation as Apple’s CEO in August 2011.

**Know your people.** You can’t do this by sitting in your corner office and hiding (or the perception you’re hiding) from reality. Get out and walk around. This is a way to help you understand the issues your employees face and allows you to get to know them better. Creating an authentic workplace is a challenge if you sit in the corner office. CEO Howard Schulz walks in to his Starbucks stores unannounced to see how things are going. **The TV program “Undercover Boss” has the same result.** Sometimes you really need to get into the trenches with the people who do the ‘dirty work’ every day.

**Create the rules.** Establish a Code of Conduct that lists the core values and behaviors that are expected. Follow through with them and make certain no one, regardless of their position, is exempt. **There may be some who will test the Code of Conduct and invent all sorts of excuses as to why they shouldn’t**

**be held accountable.** In my career, I've heard them all! Their inventiveness is extraordinary; if only they'd put as much effort in trying to follow the Code of Conduct as they did trying to tap dance around it. Provide training on the Code that's specific to your organization and talk about it when issues of conduct arise. That can also impress an outside agency if problems do occur. You show that you act in good faith, and that is reflected in everything you do. **A Code of Conduct is also useful in personal situations.** It's not a sometimes thing or to use when needed thing; like breaking the glass when a fire breaks-out. To be effective, a Code of Conduct must be part of who you are and seamless from your personal life to the workplace. **You can't be a phony and say you have a Code of Conduct. It just doesn't work!**

Be honest and dependable. Take responsibility for yourself, your life and your job.





***“A Leader Who Is Through Learning Is Through.” — John Wooden, UCLA Men’s Basketball Coach***

Medical Scientists once thought all they needed to know about the human heart could be learned by studying one kind of human: the male kind. Through many years and countless millions of dollars, cardiovascular research was conducted overwhelmingly on men. The best medical minds in the world apparently did not seriously question whether the phenomenon of heart disease might differ depending on the patient’s gender.

That one size fits all approach seems utterly bizarre, given what we know today. Women, it’s now clear, are physiologically different from men when it comes to heart health, different in critical ways, from how accurately some tests diagnose our conditions to the ways we feel symptoms of heart attack. Single sex cardiology research didn’t get at the whole story. Neither does single sex approach to most other fields of endeavor.

Just as that kind of understanding isn’t fixed by gender, it can’t be frozen in time. Neither leadership nor learning is a static proposition, a body of knowledge that gets settled and stays that way. And so, when ATHENA leaders commit to constant, lifelong learning, it’s because we think futurist Alvin Toffler got it right with this prediction: “The illiterate of the twenty first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

Lifelong learning is the process of keeping your mind and body engaged, at any age, by actively pursuing knowledge and experience. While many companies encourage lifelong learning so that their employees can keep their skills up-to-date, the pursuit of knowledge through lifelong learning has wonderful benefits for adults of all ages whether its: learning how to dance; speaking a foreign language; writing a newsletter; studying world history, philosophy or other interesting subjects; improving your golf swing; or, learning to repair your car which has the following benefits:

- Keeps your mind sharp
- Improves memory
- Increases self confidence
- Offers an inexpensive way to try something new
- Saves money as you learn to “do-it yourself
- Gives you a feeling of accomplishment
- Helps you to meet people who share your interests
- Builds on skills you already have

- Offers an opportunity to learn a new skill or trade and increase your income
- Gives you new interests that you can share with family and friends

Lifelong learning also occurs when you read about current events or read a good nonfiction book such as world history, world affairs, current affairs, etc. Lifelong learning can also take place in a structured environment.

## **15 Steps to Cultivate Life Long Learning**

### **1) Always have a book.**

It doesn't matter if it takes you a year or a week to read a book. Always strive to have a book that you are reading through, and take it with you so you can read it when you have time. Just by shaving off a few minutes in-between activities in my day I can read about a book per week. That's at least fifty each year.

### **2) Keep a "To-Learn" List**

We all have to-do lists. These are the tasks we need to accomplish. Try to also have a "to-learn" list. On it you can write ideas for new areas of study. Maybe you would like to take up a new language, learn a skill or read the collective works of Shakespeare. Whatever motivates you, write it down.

### **3) Get More Intellectual Friends**

Start spending more time with people who think. Not just people who are smart. But people who actually invest much of their time in learning new skills. Their habits will rub off on you. Even better, they will probably share some of their knowledge with you.

### **4) Guided Thinking**

Albert Einstein once said, "Any man who reads too much and uses his own brain too little falls into lazy habits of thinking." Simply studying the wisdom of others isn't enough, you have to think through ideas yourself. Spend time journaling, meditating or contemplating over ideas you have learned.

### **5) Put it Into Practice**

Skill based learning is useless if it isn't applied. Reading a book on C++ isn't the same thing as writing a program. Studying painting isn't the same as picking up a brush. If your knowledge can be applied, put it into practice.

## **6) Teach Others**

You learn what you teach. If you have an outlet of communicating ideas to others, you are more likely to solidify that learning. Start a blog, mentor someone or even discuss ideas with a friend.

## **7) Clean Your Input**

Some forms of learning are easy to digest, but often lack substance. I make a point of regularly cleaning out my feed reader for blogs I subscribe to. Great blogs can be a powerful source of new ideas. But every few months I realize I'm collecting posts from blogs that I am simply skimming. Every few months, purify your input to save time and focus on what counts.

## **8) Learn in Groups**

Lifelong learning doesn't mean condemning yourself to a stack of dusty textbooks. Join organizations that teach skills. Workshops and group learning events can make educating yourself a fun, social experience.

## **9) Unlearn Assumptions**

You can't add water to a full cup. I always try to maintain a distance away from any idea. Too many convictions simply mean too few paths for new ideas. Actively seek out information that contradicts your worldview.

## **10) Find Jobs that Encourage Learning**

Pick a career that encourages continual learning. If you are in a job that doesn't have much intellectual freedom, consider switching to one that does. Don't spend forty hours of your week in a job that doesn't challenge you.

## **11) Start a Project**

Set out to do something you don't know how. Forced learning in this way can be fun and challenging. If you don't know anything about computers, try building one. If you consider yourself a horrible artist, try a painting.

## **12) Follow Your Intuition**

Lifelong learning is like wandering through the wilderness. You can't be sure what to expect and there isn't always an end goal in mind. Letting your intuition guide you can make self-education more enjoyable. Most of our lives have been broken down to completely logical decisions, that making choices on a whim has been stamped out.

### **13) The Morning Fifteen**

Use the first fifteen minutes of your morning as a period for education. If you find yourself too groggy, you might want to wait a short time. Just don't put it off later in the day where urgent activities will push it out of the way.

### **14) Reap the Rewards**

Learn information you can use. Understanding the basics of programming allows me to handle projects that other people would require outside help. Meeting a situation that makes use of your educational efforts can be a source of pride.

### **15) Make it a Priority**

Few external forces are going to persuade you to learn. The desire has to come from within. Once you decide you want to make lifelong learning a habit, it is up to you to make it a priority in your life.