

Leadership Lessons from the life of Robert McNamara
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The death of Robert McNamara is unfortunately being overshadowed by all the media fanfare with the passing of Michael Jackson. A controversial figure, Mr. McNamara was the former leader of Ford Motor Company and the World Bank. Unfortunately his legacy was cast as the Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations when he was the designated architect of the Viet Nam war. What can we learn from this man who was a leader so scorned by many Americans?

Mr. McNamara was a very intelligent, quantitatively driven administrator. He transformed Ford Motor Company into an efficient, modern, auto manufacturer by instituting quality systems and rigorous controls. This talented strategic planner left the private sector in 1961 to lead the Department of Defense. In his memoir, "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam (1995)," he reflects on his assumptions that the lessons learned from Ford Motor could be readily applied at the Department of Defense. Thus, the first lesson learned from McNamara is that not all organizations run the same way and one needs to be aware of the organizational environment when trying to implement change. How often does our confidence based on past successes influence our approach in new situations? As a leader, are you open to learning about your environment before you prescribe the solution?

McNamara admits that the war in Vietnam was a tragic mistake. In his memoir he claims that while the war was escalating the administration had so many issues on their plates like nuclear proliferation by the Soviets, the civil rights movement, the war on poverty, tension in Eastern Europe, etc. The administration never took the time to really understand the implications of committing combat troops to Vietnam nor did they learn from the failure of the French who were previously in Vietnam. The war in Vietnam resulted in over 58,000 American troops killed. This dramatic example demonstrates how a distracted leader can make bad decisions. Organizations rely on leaders to provide focus and direction. How many over-worked executives are taking the time today to reflect on the long term consequences of their decisions? How is work being prioritized and vetted? What is the exit strategy that you have in mind when you commit to action?

Although many Americans hold contempt towards this man, perhaps his greatest display of leadership was admitting his mistakes and asking the American people to forgive him. Throughout his memoir and in the film documentary, "The Fog of War: Eleven lessons from the life of Robert S. McNamara" (2003), Mr. Secretary admits to his errors in judgment and clearly is troubled from the gravity of his decisions. Mr. McNamara was not forced into a confession. Rather, as a leader he stepped forward and took responsibility for his actions, although it was decades later. What other politician has ever voluntarily admitted to mistakes? What other leaders from the Vietnam era have publicly declared that they were distracted and didn't give the decision to go into Vietnam the rightfully deserved attention? Unfortunately, few leaders, public or private, are willing to publically admit when they are wrong. During our current financial crisis who on the Congressional Banking committee, the Security and Exchange Commission or Federal Reserve have admitted mistakes? Did the bankers or the auto companies apologize for the lives they have impacted?

Robert McNamara felt it was important for Americans to learn from his mistakes so future calamities could be avoided. These lessons would not be learned unless he exercised the courage to bear his soul. In short, the valuable leadership lessons he has left to us are the importance of not depending upon the arrogance we carry from past successes, rather leaders must also be learners. We must take the time to understand the operating environment. Be aware of others who have either failed or succeeded in that particular market. Clearly define success before we embark on a new endeavor. Understand the forces constraining potential success. Have an exit strategy if there is some unforeseen reason to abandon your strategy. Finally, as a leader, have the courage to publically share an accurate assessment resulting from your decisions. May Mr. McNamara finally rest in peace.