

Three Keys To The Leadership Kingdom

An Interview with The Honorable Dr. John Hillen

EDITORS' NOTE John Hillen is a highly accomplished CEO, Board Chairman, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State and award-winning professor who has taught strategy and leadership at Duke University, George Mason University, and Hampden-Sydney College. With extensive strategic leadership experience spanning business, government, the military, and academia, he is also the author of several influential books, including *What Happens Now? Reinvent*



The Hon. Dr. John Hillen

Yourself as a Leader Before Your Business Outruns You and, most recently, *The Strategy Dialogues*. Hillen has contributed extensively to publications such as *Forbes*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Technology*, and *The Washington Post*.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I have had four different careers: first, as a professional Army officer, then as a public policy expert and senior U.S. government official, then as a CEO of technology services firms, both public and private, and finally as a college professor and author. What ties all those different career episodes together is my passion for leadership. Every organization in the world, from the largest multinational corporation to the small church choir, has one thing in common: a group of people working together trying to accomplish something. I dedicated my life to understanding that process as a leader and trying to shape it effectively – be it in the Army, The State Department, on Wall Street, or on campus. I am now trying to give back and share what I have learned from those experiences through teaching and writing about leadership and strategy.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership?

Three “Keys” to the Leadership Kingdom: First, be an emotionally intelligent leader. It is not enough to be smart, determined, authoritative, and all the rest. Those fine qualities are not enough to build a first-class team and generate followership. Almost every success I had stemmed from channeling my emotional intelligence – building relationships through empathy, showing self and social awareness for how my teams were feeling and performing. Second, be an ethical leader. Not enough leaders are

comfortable making calls about right and wrong. That must be in a strategic leader’s comfort zone – CEO could just as well stand for Chief Ethical Officer. I was once interviewing the head of a big organization and asked him who was in charge of ethics, and he offered up HR first (no), the general counsel (no), and finally, the organizational chaplain (no). I told him all those people can help, but he must own institutional ethics as part of his responsibility. People want to trust their leaders to do the right thing – to

have judgement, not just business smarts. Finally, and no surprise given my work and most recent book – leaders need to think strategically. They should always have an eye on the future, the big picture, and the changing dynamics of the ecosystems in their competitive landscape. Too many business leaders outsource this to so-called strategy firms. Strategy is not a distraction from a leader getting things done – it is at the heart of their responsibility.

How did your time in the military impact your views on leadership and your management style?

For some reason I cannot really fathom, I’ve been at the center of a number of cataclysmic events. My Army unit was patrolling the Iron Curtain between West and East Germany the night the Berlin Wall came down. During Desert Storm, I was in the middle of the biggest tank battle since World War II. I was the COO of a financial services firm in downtown New York City on September 11th, just a few blocks from the World Trade Center. And I did an IPO in the middle of the recession in 2009 – one of a handful of successful IPOs in the American economy that year. So, I’ve been blessed or cursed, depending on your outlook, to be in high-stakes leadership situations from the very start of my career.

What attracted you to public service and has made this work so meaningful to you?

I am powerfully in love with America – perhaps, to paraphrase Charles de Gaulle and use the title of a Peggy Noonan book – “a certain idea of America.” I have been in over 90 countries around the world and have a PhD in international relations, so I really appreciate how unique the U.S. is. Not a day goes by where I am not stunned at the audacity and success of the American experiment in

self-governance – and how different it is from the experience of other societies and countries. I felt that in my bones, even as a kid. And my formative years were during what I will call the Reagan restoration of American confidence and self-belief. So, I always wanted to be part of that experiment in self-governance, trying to make it better – to create “a more perfect union” in the words of the Constitution. We are very far from perfect as a country, but that is the public service challenge – create a more perfect union if it is imperfect now.

What interested you in writing your new book, *The Strategy Dialogues*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

My goal in *The Strategy Dialogues* is to take a complex, sometimes perplexing subject, and bring it out of the clouds and down to the basics so people can use it every day. I wanted a one-stop shop that gave leaders and students the foundational frameworks and techniques of business strategy and strategic management – in one place at your fingertips.

Moreover, I tell the tale of strategic management the way people learn it – in a dialogue. They talk it out, learn together, and the sense of the strategic thinking process unveils itself along with all the tools and frameworks that strategists use.

My overall message, above all the details about strategic management in the book, is that strategy is a “way” to think, not a “what” to think. Every executive needs to learn to think that way and they can. But like building a muscle in the gym, they need to work at it. Organizations do not need to hire an expensive mainline strategy consulting firm – they can do that work themselves, and should.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

- Learn to Manage Up – this is a hard skill and you need to work on it early. The last time I failed to effectively manage “up” I got fired – and I was an award-winning CEO. Do not take for granted, even after your first week on the job, that you and your boss are on the same sheet of music about how you will be successful in his or her eyes.

- Model the “Wells” – Dr. Robert Franklin, a former president of Morehouse College, told his college students to be “Well-Read, Well-Spoken, Well-Traveled, Well-Dressed, and Well-Balanced.” I could go on and on about the

“Makes strategy actionable and understandable.”

—PATRICK LENCIONI, author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

The STRATEGY Dialogues



A Primer on Business Strategy and Strategic Management

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wisdom of this advice – and advise you to look up Dr. Franklin’s own explanations for it, but it really speaks for itself.

- Observe and Recognize Behaviors – speaking of behaviors, turn yourself into a behavioral scientist at work, and observation is your method. I’ve always been a mimic – but with a purpose and a discerning eye. I would look around the organization and see whose behavior was garnering positive responses and results, and whose was turning people off and

impeding progress. Then I’d try to understand and model the former behavior in a way that was authentic to me. Simple, eh? But you’d be surprised at how many people are blind to this process.

- Be Curious – I have a friend who ended his career as the CEO of a \$12 billion global healthcare company. When he started, he was simply a financial analyst in the corporate development department – not exactly at the center of the action in a firm that made its

money from medical devices and other innovations. But he was remarkably curious. He sat at lunch with the scientists and doctors (uninvited sometimes). He volunteered his extra time to help them in their work with his financial skills. He asked questions of them to learn how they made decisions and processed information. His curiosity and willingness to follow it with his time and energy to help others eventually earned him the CEO role. Genuinely curious people who are willing to take on extra duties to learn new things stand out right away from their peers.

- Build a Strategic Network – about halfway through their career, most executives learn the secret contained in Sid Fuchs’ book *Get Off The Bench* – that their strategic network and strategic relationships are the most powerful asset they have. And then they scramble to assemble this critical foundation of most successful careers. But, as Sid points out, if you wait until you need a relationship, it is too late to build it at that point. So, start now. A strategic network is not the 10-12 people you work around every day that help you accomplish your job, or your close professional friends. Network scholars call those operational and personal networks. Your strategic network is composed of people outside your immediate professional circle who might help pull you into certain circles, provide key information, or open future opportunities. It might not be obvious at this stage in your career about how they could be relevant, but as you deliberately form a strategic network it becomes clearer.

- Keep Score – your generation has been brought up in a much more collaborative and team-oriented environment than mine. And, on balance, the world is probably a better place for it. But the team orientation can hinder your understanding of your own accomplishments in your first job. I’ve found that young professionals with four or five years on the job sometimes have a hard time articulating their achievements. They can talk about the team they were on at this company or that company, and what the team did, but when I push for individual accomplishments they often come up dry. But I was likely looking to hire an individual – not a team. You need to keep score at the individual level and assemble a body-of-work for which you can take credit or ownership.

- Be a Systems Thinker – too many new employees are in the dark about how things connect in their enterprise because that information is not in their welcome packet or it might seem like it’s none of their business. But you become so much more effective – so much more powerful in your ability to contribute – if you know why things are the way they are. Why do you use this tool or vendor rather than that one? Why does the CEO announce this financial goal one quarter and a different one the next? Why did your competition go one way and your company went a different way? Ask, probe, inquire. Most people don’t. It is easier for them to try and fill in their own theories sometimes. ●