

THE SHAPING IMPULSE: ENTREPRENEURS, LEADERSHIP, AND THE KENNEDY VISION

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In my ongoing search for inspiration and guidance in counseling owner managers I have discovered valuable expressions of entrepreneurial spirit and principles of leadership in the words of John and Robert Kennedy (“JFK” and “RFK”). Raised by an entrepreneur father they inherited wealth, education, an obligation to the lesser privileged and a duty to public service. They were committed, courageous, compassionate and visionary. They believed in challenge, change and progress. Above all else, they were eloquent. Their vision of leadership is a most important part of their legacy.

Entrepreneurial Spirit Defined

Our future may lay beyond our vision, but it is not completely beyond our control. It is the shaping impulse of America that neither fate nor nature nor the irresistible tides of history, but the work of our own hands, matched to reason and principle, that will determine destiny. There is pride in that, even arrogance, but there is also experience and truth. In any event, it is the only way we can live. *RFK*¹

Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all these acts will be written the history of this generation. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. *RFK*²

Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not. *JFK and RFK*³

The Limits of Entrepreneurial Spirit

No matter what talent an individual possesses, what energy he might have, no matter how much integrity and how much honesty he might have, if he is by himself ... he can accomplish very little. But if he is sustained [by others] dedicated to the same things that he was attempting to accomplish, he can accomplish a great deal. *RFK*⁴

Wealth is the means – people are the ends. All our material riches will avail us little if we do not use them to expand the opportunities of our people ... *JFK*⁵

This country can not afford to be materially rich and spiritually poor ... *JFK*⁶

... a concern that all of us share: that our lives should make a difference to ourselves and our fellow men. *RFK*⁷

The Importance of Free Enterprise

... private enterprise is not just another part of America; in a significant sense, it is the very sinew and strength of America. *RFK*⁸

For private industry is the primary source of investment capital and technological skill in all developed nations ... *RFK*⁹

Being A Chief Executive

For those of us to whom much is given, much is required. *JFK*¹⁰

... the White House is not only the center of political leadership. It must be the center of moral leadership – a “bully pulpit,” as Theodore Roosevelt described it. *JFK*¹¹

We will need ... a President who is willing and able to summon his national constituency to its finest hour – to alert the people to our dangers and our opportunities – to demand of them the sacrifices that will be necessary. *JFK*¹²

... the President's responsibility cannot be delegated. For he is the one focal point of responsibility ... He does not have to wait for unanimous agreement below ... He does not have to wait for crises to spur decisions that are long overdue. He must look ahead – and sometimes act alone ... *JFK*¹³

... the President's responsibility is to all the people. He must strengthen them – and draw strength from them; educate them – and represent them; pledge his best – and inspire theirs. *JFK*¹⁴

Leadership

... I believe the times demand invention, innovation, imagination, decision. ... For courage, not complacency, is our need today – leadership, not salesmanship. And the only test of leadership is the ability to lead, and lead vigorously. *JFK*¹⁵

... I believe in a government which acts, which exercises its full powers and its full responsibilities. Government is an art and a precious obligation; and when it has a job to do, I believe it should do it. And this requires not only great ends but that we propose concrete means of achieving them. Our responsibility is not discharged by announcement of virtuous ends. *JFK*¹⁶

Challenge, and Challenging Other

We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win ... *JFK*¹⁷

... the New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises – it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them. It appeals to their pride, not to their pocketbook – it holds out the promise of more sacrifice instead of more security. *JFK*¹⁸

Are we up to the task – are we equal to the challenge? Are we willing to match the Russian sacrifice of the present for the future – or must we sacrifice our future in order to enjoy the present? That is the question of the New Frontier. That is the choice our nation must make – a choice that lies ... between national greatness and national decline – between the fresh air of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of “normalcy” – between determined dedication and creeping mediocrity ... we cannot fail to try. *JFK*¹⁹

I think the question is ... Are we doing as much as we can do? Are we as strong as we should be? Are we as strong as we must be ... I should make it very clear that I do not think we're doing enough, that I am not satisfied as an American with the progress we are making ... I think we are going to have to do a better job if we are going to meet the responsibilities which time and events have placed on us. *JFK*²⁰

And so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country. *JFK*²¹

Empowering Others

I believe in human dignity as the source of national purpose, in human liberty as the source of national action, in the human heart as the source of national compassion, and in the human mind as the source of our invention and our ideas. *JFK*²²

Long ago the Greeks defined happiness as “the exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope”. *RFK*²³

Independence and responsibility are not given or taught; they can only be learned by practice – including the practice of making mistakes. *RFK*²⁴

Managing Dissent

Let it be clear that this administration recognizes the value of dissent and daring, that we greet healthy controversy as the hallmark of healthy change. *JFK*²⁵

The task of leadership, the first task of concerned people, is not to condemn or castigate or deplore; it is to search out the reason for disillusionment and alienation, the rationale for protest and dissent – perhaps, indeed, to learn from it. *RFK*²⁶

But we need not fear the presence of dissenting voices ... Rather, our willingness to listen, and to let our most severe critics see our strengths and our weaknesses, will be a clear demonstration of our basic faith; and it will, in my judgment, make a distinct impression ... *RFK*²⁷

Negotiating

Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate. *JFK*²⁸

... let us understand what negotiations are. A negotiated settlement must be less than victory for either side. *RFK*²⁹

... it is a test of our national maturity to accept the fact that negotiations are not a contest spelling victory or defeat ... They are likely to be successful only if both sides reach an agreement which both regard as preferable to the status quo – an agreement in which each side can consider its own situation to be improved. *JFK*³⁰

Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. *JFK*³¹

Objective assessment of the prospects for a negotiated settlement rests on clear analysis of the minimum goals of both sides, our adversary's as well as our own. *RFK*³²

If vital interests under duress can be preserved by peaceful means, negotiations will find that out. If our adversary will accept nothing less than a concession of our rights, negotiations will find that out. And if negotiations are to take place, this nation cannot abdicate to its adversary the task of choosing the forum and the framework and the time ... *JFK*³³

Executing on Your Principles

That is not to say the popularity should be the judge of our actions. Indeed, there have been many occasions in the past, and there will be others in the future, when our judgment of national interest, or even the best interests of others, will be decidedly unpopular; on those occasions, we will simply have to stand unpopular. *RFK*³⁴

I hope my own views are clear. I want our party to speak out with courage and candor on every issue – and that includes civil rights. I want no compromise of basic principles – no evasion of basic controversies – and no second-class citizenship for any American anywhere in this country. I have not made nor will I make any commitments inconsistent with these objectives. *JFK*³⁵

I realize that this is in some measure an act of faith and vision, for we do not know what benefits await us. But ... [to] do all this, and do it right, and do it first before this decade is out, then we must be bold ... *JFK*³⁶

Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change. *RFK*³⁷

Rewarding Others

To give land to the man who works is to give him, for the first time, a degree of security, something more than subsistence living, a place to stand for his rights as a citizen, a share and stake in the society around him. *RFK*³⁸

Seeking A Higher Purpose

Of course if we must act effectively we must deal with the world as it is. We must get things done. But if there was one thing President Kennedy stood for that touched the most profound feelings of people across the world, it was the belief that idealism, high aspirations, and deep convictions are not incompatible with the most practical and efficient programs – that there is no basic inconsistency between ideals and realistic possibilities, no separation between the deepest desires of the heart and mind and in the rational application of human effort to human problems. *RFK*³⁹

Technology

Everywhere new technology and communications brings men and nations closer together. And all our new closeness is stripping away false masks, the illusion of difference that is at the root of injustice and hate and war. Only earthbound man still clings to the dark and poisoning superstition that his world is bounded by the nearest hill, his universe ended at a river shore, his common humanity enclosed in the tight circle of those who share his town and views and the color of his skin. *RFK*⁴⁰

A Closing Thought

And when at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each of us ... our success or failure, in whatever office we hold, will be measured by our answers to four questions:

First, were we truly men of courage – with the courage to stand up to one’s enemies – and the courage to stand up, when necessary, to one’s own associates – the courage to resist public pressure as well as private greed?

Secondly, were we truly men of judgment – with perceptive judgment of the future as well as the past – of our own mistakes as well as the mistakes of others – with enough wisdom to know what we did not know, and enough candor to admit it?

Third, were we truly men of integrity – men who never ran out on either the principles in which we believed or the people who believed in us – men whom neither financial gain nor political ambition could ever divert from the fulfillment our sacred trust?

Finally, were we truly men of dedication – with an honor mortgaged to no single individual or group, and compromised by no private obligation or aim, but devoted solely to serving the public good and the national interest? *JFK*⁴¹

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¹ RFK, *Newer World*, p. 233.

² RFK, *Affirmation Address*.

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- ³ EMK, Eulogy; a quote from George Bernard Shaw adopted and used by JFK and RFK.
- ⁴ RFK, Convention Address.
- ⁵ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 156.
- ⁶ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 170.
- ⁷ RFK, Newer World, p.16.
- ⁸ RFK, Newer World, p. 42.
- ⁹ RFK, Newer World, p. 99.
- ¹⁰ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 57.
- ¹¹ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 22.
- ¹² JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 22.
- ¹³ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 24.
- ¹⁴ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 26.
- ¹⁵ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p.101.
- ¹⁶ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 107.
- ¹⁷ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p.178.
- ¹⁸ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 101.
- ¹⁹ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 102.
- ²⁰ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, pp. 103 and 105.
- ²¹ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 14.
- ²² JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 106.
- ²³ RFK, Newer World, p. 61.
- ²⁴ RFK, Newer World, p. 111.
- ²⁵ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 59.
- ²⁶ RFK, Newer World, p. 3.
- ²⁷ RFK, Newer World, p. 89.
- ²⁸ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 13.
- ²⁹ RFK, Newer World, p. 204.
- ³⁰ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 396.
- ³¹ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 13.
- ³² RFK, Newer World, p. 209.
- ³³ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 396.
- ³⁴ RFK, Newer World, p. 108.
- ³⁵ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 183.
- ³⁶ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 180.
- ³⁷ RFK, Newer World, p. 232.
- ³⁸ RFK, Newer World, p. 77.
- ³⁹ RFK, Newer World, p. 232.
- ⁴⁰ RFK, Newer World, p. 229.
- ⁴¹ JFK, Let The Word Go Forth, p. 57.