

# “I learned by pulling on doors marked push”

## *Leadership Lessons from General Rick Hillier*

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### **By Rick Spence**

At a recent leadership conference in Toronto, most of the speakers were, of course, American. When it comes to prominent leaders who stand for something bigger than themselves, Canada seems under-represented (except of course in the televised federal election debates, when we suddenly have too many leaders).

The Canuck exception at “The Art of Leadership” was Rick Hillier, the career cavalry officer from Newfoundland who served as chief of the defence staff from 2005 to 2008. One of the most charismatic and controversial people ever to lead the Canadian Forces, General Hillier endured a barrage of criticism for his zealotry in pursuing the Afghan mission; but nobody questioned his success in raising the morale of the Forces, re-engaging Canadians with their army, navy and air force, or rebuilding Canada’s reputation as a military power in the eyes of our allies.

On stage at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Hillier proved a charismatic, compelling personality, quick with the jokes and a salty tongue that seemed especially to amuse the middle managers in attendance. Recounting a grab-bag of stories from his career (many of them taken from his new book, *Leadership: 50 Points of Wisdom for Today’s Leaders*), Hillier offered a home-grown lecture on hard-knocks leadership for the real world. Here are 10 ideas worth implementing at your forward operating base.

- First of all, he made clear, leaders don't take the easy roads. “I learned my stuff bumbling around and pulling on doors marked ‘push,’” says Hillier. He believes that leaders set high standards for themselves and others, and don't compromise their principles. In his book, he recalls when federal budget cuts left forces bases so strapped for cash that they couldn't afford to maintain the grounds or buildings; the brass recommended using soldiers to paint buildings or cut grass. Hillier refused to let his professional troops – trained specialists as fighters, snipers and engineers – mow the lawn. (“It took a while,” Hillier records, “but we won the fight.”)
- Don't be dismayed by the abundance of bad leadership in your organization; leverage their weaknesses to build your own skills. “I learned 70% of my leadership lessons from bad leaders,” he told the conference crowd. “Use them, look at how they're behaving, and tell yourself you will never do that.”

- “Your job as a leader is all about people,” says Hillier. “Attract the right people. Let them know what they have to do. Give them the tools to do the job. And when they get it done, your job as a leader is to make sure they get the credit for it.”
- Stand up for your team, even when it’s risky. (Maybe especially then.) In February 2005, when Hillier was invested as chief of defence staff, he deliberately took on his new bosses – then-Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson; then-prime minister Paul Martin, and his defence minister, Bill Graham. As he relates in his book, Hillier called for increased military funding. He acknowledged that the government would probably never be able to give the men and women in the Forces enough money to do all the jobs it asks them to do. But then he added, “We can give them too little, and that is what we are now doing. Remember them in your budgets.”
- Create a culture of respect and willingness to achieve in your team. Don’t tolerate people who don’t share those values. “There will always be ruthless, soul-destroying, energy-sucking people” on a team, he says. “Get them out of your organization.”
- Yes, he sighs, try to rehabilitate the laggards first. “Give them a chance to redeem themselves. But you fire their ass out the door if they can’t do it.”
- In tough times, says, Hillier, “you have to be there with your people and share the challenge with them.” As C-i-C, Hillier spent as much time as possible in the field with his troops, sharing coffee with the officers, debating ornery non-coms, and speaking to the assembled troops. Whatever their task, he says, “Make sure they know they have hope.”
- Motivate your teams around their missions. “Fill people full of piss and vinegar so they are inspired to do what you want them to do.”
- Keep things simple: run interference for your people when bureaucracy threatens to frustrate them or hold them back. “Don’t get bogged down in process,” says Hillier, “or the process will become the product.”
- Unite the community, not just your team. Hillier made a point of getting to know civilians who went out of their way to support the troops: people such as Gladys Osmond, of Springdale, Nfld., who has written more than 100,000 chatty letters to members of the armed forces since 1984. In 2006 Hiller presented her with the Canadian Forces Medallion for Distinguished Service – recognizing how much her letters have done to build morale for homesick warriors. “She connects them back to this wonderful country,” says Hillier. You have to recognize and support the people who support your people.