

## THE BIG IDEAS

### The Thirteen Rules

Of a luminary leader.

### Perpetual Optimism

Is a force multiplier.

### It Can Be Done

Let's be optimistic but not stupid.

### The Zone of Calm

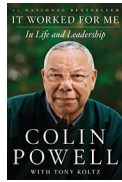
Great leaders create one.

### Plans

To be revised immediately.

### Fear and Failure

Are omnipresent. You got this!



# It Worked for Me

In Life and Leadership

BY COLIN POWELL · HARPER PERENNIAL © 2014 · 304 PAGES

“I love stories. In the course of my career, I gathered a number of them that mean a lot to me. Most come from my military life. I was in the military from age seventeen, as an ROTC cadet, until I was a retired GI at age fifty-six. Others came from my service as Secretary of State or National Security Advisor. Yet others came to me as I just wandered through life. In this book I want to share with you a selection of these stories and experiences that have stayed with me over the years; each one of them taught me something important about life and leadership. I offer them to you for whatever use you may wish to make of them.

As you will see, there are no conclusions or recommendations, just my observations. The chapters are freestanding. You can read them straight through or jump in anywhere. Everyone has life lessons and stories. These are mine. All I can say is that they worked for me.”

~ Colin Powell from *It Worked for Me*

Colin Powell is a beautiful man.

That's what I thought when I first looked at the cover. And, I felt that at an even deeper level after reading this brilliant book.

In fact, one afternoon as part of my shutdown complete ritual I cleared off my desk and put this book in the center as a symbol of my focus for my next morning's AM1 Deep Work time block.

After placing it there, I was captivated by Powell's presence and thought to myself as I anticipated my time reading the book, “Wow. I'm really blessed. I get to hang out with the coolest people on the planet.”

Then I thought of just how true that statement is. I get to hang out with some of the world's leading thinkers (via their books and interviews) AND I get to hang out with YOU. What a joy.

I'm smiling as I type this thinking about the fact that I get paid to basically connect cool people to one another. Thank you for making that possible! I'm honored. Now... On to the show!

I got this book after finding a Colin Powell quote related to a Google search I did on “force multipliers.” It's a fantastic look at his “Thirteen Rules” of leadership plus a ton of other wisdom.

It's now one of my favorite leadership books and memoirs. I loved it and highly recommend it. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

Of course, it's packed with Big Ideas. And, of course, I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

## THE THIRTEEN RULES

“Shortly after I arrived at FORSCOM (Arm's Forces Command), *Parade* magazine, the long-running Sunday supplement with a readership of more than fifty million people, asked to do

*“All followers need to feel they belong to a team, a tribe, a band. Leaders are leaders because they pass on the generations of experience they have amassed. They give purpose to the team, give it structure, hold it to standards, nurse and nurture the team, slap it upside the head, as needed, and above all give the followers someone to look up to.”*

~ Colin Powell

*"If you take pay, earn it.  
Always do your best. Even  
when no one else is looking,  
you always are. Don't  
disappoint yourself."*

~ Colin Powell

a cover story about me and my new assignment—one of those short personal articles aimed at Americans reading their Sunday newspapers over coffee. ...

Its author, David Wallechinsky, a highly skilled journalist, needed a hook to close the piece. One of my secretaries, Sergeant Commie Brown, urged him to ask me about the couple of dozen snippets of paper shoved under the glass cover on my desktop—quotes and aphorisms that I had collected or made up over the years. David called and asked if I would read off a few. The thirteen I read him appeared in a sidebar in the article.

After they were first printed in *Parade*—to my great surprise—the Thirteen Rules caught on. Over the past twenty-three years, my assistants have given out hundreds of copies of that list in many different forms; they have been PowerPointed and flashed around the world on the Internet.

Here are my rules and the reasons I have hung on to them.”

Welcome to Chapter #1: “My Thirteen Rules.”

Here’s the super quick look:

1. **IT AIN’T AS BAD AS YOU THINK. IT WILL LOOK BETTER IN THE MORNING.**
2. **GET MAD, THEN GET OVER IT.**
3. **AVOID HAVING YOUR EGO SO CLOSE TO YOUR POSITION THAT WHEN YOUR POSITION FALLS, YOUR EGO GOES WITH IT.**
4. **IT CAN BE DONE.**
5. **BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU CHOOSE. YOU MAY GET IT.**
6. **DON’T LET ADVERSE FACTS STAND IN THE WAY OF A GOOD DECISION.**
7. **YOU CAN’T MAKE SOMEONE ELSE’S DECISIONS. YOU SHOULDN’T LET SOMEONE ELSE MAKE YOURS.**
8. **CHECK SMALL THINGS.**
9. **SHARE CREDIT.**
10. **REMAIN CALM. BE KIND.**
11. **HAVE A VISION. BE DEMANDING.**
12. **DON’T TAKE COUNSEL OF YOUR FEARS OR NAYSAYERS.**
13. **PERPETUAL OPTIMISM IS A FORCE MULTIPLIER.**

Each of those Rules comes with a great story to bring the point home. Check out the book for more. For now, let’s take a quick look at a couple of my favorites (starting with the one that led me to get the book) and then on to some more wisdom we can apply to our lives TODAY!

## **PERPETUAL OPTIMISM**

“In the military, we are always looking for ways to leverage up our forces. Having greater communications and command and control over your forces than your enemy has over his is a force multiplier. Having greater logistics capability than the enemy is a force multiplier. Having better-trained commanders is a force multiplier.

Perpetual optimism, believing in yourself, believing in your purpose, believing you will prevail, and demonstrating passion and confidence is a force multiplier. If you believe and have prepared your followers, the followers will believe.”

*Perpetual optimism.*

<- Isn't that a BEAUTIFUL phrase?

*"It can be done' should not metamorphose into a blindly can-do approach, which leaves you running into brick walls. I try to be an optimist, but I try not to be stupid."*

~ Colin Powell

We'll ground that optimism into reality in our next Idea, for now, let's focus on the fact that a leader's "perpetual optimism" is a FORCE MULTIPLIER.

Couple things come to mind. First, force multipliers.

Do you know what that phrase means? It's a military term that can be applied to any (and every) domain of our lives. As PersonalMBA defines it for us: "*Force Multipliers are tools that help you amplify your effort to produce more output. A hammer is a force multiplier. Investing in Force Multipliers means that you'll get more done with the same amount of effort.*"

Cap'n Obvious check in: Would you rather get a nail into the wall via your fist or a via a hammer? Same basic effort required in the swinging motion but that handy hammer "multiplies" your force to create a much larger output (without all the pain).

"Perpetual optimism." That's a force multiplier. (btw: So is our Energy which is why we spend SO MUCH time talking about it.)

Now for some science on the force multiplying math.

Although there are some finer details to the precise definitions of "hope" vis-a-vis "optimism," for the sake of our discussion let's make hope and optimism synonymous as we feast on this data from [Making Hope Happen](#) that does the force multiplicative math for us: "*When people have a boss who makes them feel hopeful about the future, they are more committed to their jobs. Specifically, when Gallup asked followers whether their leader at work (typically a manager) made them enthusiastic about the future, of those who said yes, 69 percent were engaged in their jobs, scoring high on a measure of involvement in and excitement about their work. These engaged employees are the products of hopeful leadership. They are more innovative and productive than others, and they are more likely to be with the company for the long haul.*

*Of those followers who said their leader did not make them enthusiastic about the future, a mere 1 percent were committed and energized at work. These disengaged workers are a threat to business, coworkers, and themselves. They not only fail to make meaningful contributions; they undermine the hard work of others, and they are likely to be more physically and mentally unhealthy than their coworkers. And, for good and bad, it is somewhat likely that they won't be with the company one year later.*"

1% vs. 69%?! (That stat always elicits a "Wow.")

Leaders with perpetual optimism who make their team members feel hopeful have, according to that study, team members who are roughly 69 (!!) times more engaged in their jobs.

Yep. I'd call that a force multiplier.

## IT CAN BE DONE

*"It can be done.' This familiar quotation is on a desk plaque given to me by the great humorist Art Buchwald. Once again, it is more about attitude than reality. Maybe it can't be done, but always start out believing you can get it done until facts and analysis pile up against it. Have a positive and enthusiastic approach to every task. Don't surround yourself with instant skeptics. At the same time, don't shut out skeptics and colleagues who give you solid counterviews. 'It can be done' should not metamorphose into a blindly can-do approach, which leaves you running into brick walls. I try to be an optimist, but I try not to be stupid."*

It can be done. That's Rule #4.

We want to START with that attitude.

But, alas, we also want to make sure we ground that optimism into reality lest we find ourselves

*"At the end of the sermon, the priest looked over the congregation and with a smile on his face quietly concluded: 'Always show more kindness than seems necessary, because the person receiving it needs it more than you will ever know.'"*

~ Colin Powell

running into brick walls.

Which leads us to this line that made me laugh out loud when I first read it, again when I underlined it and once again as I typed it out: *"I try to be an optimist, but I try not to be stupid."*

All of that leads us to some wisdom from Rule #6 where Powell echoes that perspective: *"Whenever I'm faced with a difficult choice, my approach has always been to make an estimate of the situation—a familiar military process: What's the situation? What's the mission? What are the different courses of action? How do they compare with one another? Which looks most likely to succeed? Now follow your informed instinct, decide, and execute forcefully; throw the mass of your forces and energy behind the choice. Then take a deep breath and hope it works, remembering that 'hope is a bad supper, but makes a good breakfast.'"*

Believe it can be done. Enjoy that hope-filled breakfast.

Then rub that hope up against reality to create grounded optimism.

(Think: [WOOP!](#) + [The Stockdale Paradox](#) + [Buoyancy](#).)

Then have that type of optimism PERPETUALLY. And multiply your power.

## THE ZONE OF CALM

*"Few people make sound or sustainable decisions in an atmosphere of chaos. The more serious the situation, usually accompanied by a deadline, the more likely everyone will get excited and bounce around like water on a hot skillet. At those times I try to establish a calm zone but retain a sense of urgency. Calmness protects order, ensures that we consider all the possibilities, restores order when it breaks down, and keeps people from shouting over each other.*

*You are in a storm. The captain must steady the ship, watch all the gauges, listen to all the department heads, and steer through it. If the leader loses his head, confidence in him will be lost and the glue that holds the team together will start to give way. So assess the situation, move fast, be decisive, but remain calm and never let them see you sweat.*

*The calm zone is part of an emotional spectrum that I work to maintain."*

That's from Rule #10: "Remain Calm. Be Kind."

Powell tells us that a leader has a healthy spectrum of emotions but I just love that idea of a "calm zone."

Reminds me of Eknath Easwaran's great book [Strength in the Storm](#). He tells us: *"Few human beings are born with the skill to weather storms and stress with grace. Yet everyone can learn. We can't control the weather outside, but we can control how we respond. ...*

*For it is in the mind that the storms of life really blow. What matters is not so much the turmoil outside us as the weather within. To a person with an agitated mind, something as minor as a rude driver can cause enough stress to ruin a day. By contrast I think of Mahatma Gandhi, who gave himself away when he confessed, 'I love storms.' Gandhi began life as a timid child, but he learned to keep his mind so steady that he could face tremendous crises with courage, compassion, wisdom, and even a sense of humor.*

*This steadiness of mind is one of the most practical skills. Without it, no one can face the challenges of life without breaking. And life today is challenging to say the least. We live in the midst of conflicts — within ourselves, at home, in the community, even nationally and internationally. This is an age of conflict, which makes it an age of anxiety as well. Nothing is more vital than learning to face this turmoil with confidence and compassion."*

"Confidence and compassion." "Calm and kind."

I love it when brilliant thinkers from such different perspectives agree on the fundamentals.

*"In my own experience, a deep breath is always a good first reaction to a first report. Try to let the potato cool a bit before you pick it up."*

~ Colin Powell

*"After it was all over, I was reminded of one of my favorite classical maxims, sometimes attributed to Thucydides: 'Of all the manifestations of power, restraint impresses men most.'"*

~ Colin Powell

*"Always try to get over failure quickly. Learn from it. Study how you contributed to it. If you are responsible for it, own up to it. Through others may have greater responsibility for it than you do, don't look for that as an escape hatch. Once you have analyzed what went wrong and what you did wrong, internalize the lessons and then move on. As always, drive through life looking through the front windshield and not the rearview mirror. ... Learn and move on."*

~ Colin Powell

## PLANS: TO BE REVISED THE MOMENT EXECUTION STARTS

"Plans are neither successful nor unsuccessful until they are executed. And the successful execution of a plan is more important than the plan itself. I was trained to expect a plan to need revision at the moment execution starts, and to always have a bunch of guys in a back room thinking about what could go right or wrong and making contingency plans to deal with either possibility.

The leader must be agile in thought and action. He must be ready to revise a plan, or dump it, if it isn't working or if new opportunities appear. Above all, the leader must never be blinded by the perceived brilliance of his plan or personal investment in it. The leader must watch the execution from beginning to end and do what it tells him."

Plans. They're (obviously) absolutely essential AND we need to "expect a plan to need revision at the moment execution starts."

Earlier in the book Powell put this wisdom a little differently. He said: "It reminds the young Patton of two military maxims: 'No plan survives first contact with the enemy' and 'Even the most brilliant of strategists must occasionally take into account the presence of the enemy.'"

All of which reminds me of some more wisdom from Shane Lopez's *Making Hope Happen*.

Here's how he puts it: "World-famous boxer and armchair philosopher Mike Tyson once observed, 'Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.' No matter how good we are at futurecasting, life throws punches. A key skill of high-hope people is the ability to plan for ifs, the ability to anticipate obstacles and create multiple pathways to each and every goal. This skill is rooted in two core beliefs of hopeful people: there are many paths to goals and none of them is free of obstacles."

I'm also reminded of Jeff Goins and his wisdom on "pivots" in *The Art of Work*. He tells us: "Pivoting isn't plan B; it's a part of the process. Unexpected things will happen; setbacks do occur. Whether or not you're prepared to pivot will affect how well you weather those storms and find a way to survive. ... We often look at successful people, hearing their stories of failure, and think that they succeeded despite the fact that they failed. But that's not true. Successful people and organizations don't succeed in spite of failure. They succeed because of it."

Which leads us to the next Idea...

## FEAR AND FAILURE: ARE ALWAYS PRESENT

"I probably learned as much from failures and my naysayers as from my supporting rabbis. Failure comes with experience.

I recall a few years ago speaking at an elite and very highly structured Japanese high school. The kids were from good families and mostly very bright. After my remarks, designated kids from the honor roll lined up to ask me questions typed out on cards and fully vetted by their teachers.

After the first couple of questions, I turned away from the line and invited questions from anyone in the audience, with my eyes particularly focused on the back rows, where I used to try to sit. One girl about thirteen years old raised her hand, and I called on her. 'Are you ever afraid?' she asked. 'I am afraid every day,' she continued. 'I am afraid to fail.' How brave she was to ask that question in public in a very structured Japanese high school.

Yes, I told her. I'm afraid of something every day, and I fail at something every day. Fear and failure are always present. Accept them as part of life and learn how to manage these realities. Be scared, but keep going. Being scared is usually transient. It will pass. If you fail, fix the causes and keep going.

*"A life is about events; it's about challenges met and overcome-or not; it's about successes and failures. But more than all of these put together, it's about how we touch and are touched by the people we meet. It's all about the people. I hope that comes through clearly in the pages you have just read. The people in my life have made me what I am."*

~ Colin Powell

The room was deadly silent. Every one of the young high achievers had the same question before their mind, even if they were too scared to put voice to it."

That's from the final section in the book in which we explore a wide range of stories including Colin's, as he puts it, "rocky education career."

Although he went on to become the highest-ranking military officer in the country, he didn't go to an elite military academy like West Point. In fact, he barely graduated from City College of New York (which he calls "Harvard for the poor") where he was in ROTC.

As he says: "I love telling my story of my rocky education career to youngsters. My point is, it isn't where you start your life that counts, it is where you end up. So, believe in yourself, work hard, study hard, be your own role model, believe that anything is possible, and always do your best. Remember that your past is not necessarily your future."

But that's not the principle point of this Idea.

This is: We ALL (!!!) feel fear. Even the bravest warriors among us.

As Steven Pressfield puts it in *The War of Art* (every time I read/share this quote it hits me anew): "The amateur believes he must first overcome his fear, then he can do his work. The professional knows that fear can never be overcome. He knows there's no such thing as a fearless warrior or a dread-free artist."

One more time: We ALL (!!!) feel fear.

Powell tells us: "Fear is a normal human emotion. It is not in itself a killer. We can learn to be aware when fear grips us, and can train to operate through and in spite of fear. If, on the other hand, we don't understand that fear is normal and has to be controlled and overcome, it will paralyze us and stop us in our tracks. We will no longer think clearly or analyze rationally. We prepare for it and control it; we never let it control us. If it does, we cannot lead."

btw: Our last Note was on *The 5 Second Rule* by Mel Robbins. Her big thing? Quit over thinking it and letting fear run the show. Instead, follow her 5 Second Rule: "The Moment you have an instinct to act on a goal you must 5-4-3-2-1 and physically move or your brain will stop you."

Here's to alchemizing our fear as we lead ourselves first and give the world all we've got!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
Chief Philosopher

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## About the Author of "It Worked for Me"

COLIN POWELL



Colin Powell was born in New York City in 1937. He is a retired four-star general in the United States Army and has earned numerous military, civilian, and foreign honors. He has served four presidential administrations in a variety of roles, most recently as Secretary of State from 2001 to 2005. He lives in Virginia.

## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at [optimize.me](https://optimize.me).