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Leading in positive

Francisco Gan

“We need leaders in the art of the possible surrounded by the best advisers, who do not tell the leaders what they want to hear, but rather what they can achieve”



Francisco Gan | Lieutenant General of the Spanish Army

Francisco José Gan is a retired Lieutenant General of the Spanish Army. Graduate in Political Science and Sociology. Master's Degree in National Defence. Doctor Honoris Causa from Universidad Católica de Valencia. Guest professor at the leading Spanish universities and business schools. He is known for his contribution to the modernisation of the army and for his leadership in UN and NATO peacekeeping missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

He has authored numerous publications in specialised magazines on Leadership, Geopolitics and Applied Intelligence. Former Deputy Chairman of the Spanish Geographic Society (SGE).

Advanced course in mountaineering. Ski and climbing instructor. In the field of mountaineering and polar exploration, he has participated in numerous expeditions as a member of the High Altitude military group. First Spaniard and fifth person in the world to reach the three summits of the Earth: Geographic North Pole (1999), Geographic South Pole (1995) and Everest (1992).

You are a retired Lieutenant General of the Spanish Army but as part of your work in the armed forces over more than 40 years you have been credited with making a major contribution to the modernisation of the army and are known for your leadership of UN and NATO peace missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Afghanistan. In all these achievements you have been surrounded by great leaders and have participated in important international negotiations. **In your experience, what are the characteristics you most admire in a leader? How would you define a successful model of leadership?**

Indeed, a long life gives one the opportunity to learn about different leadership models.

Leadership is a capacity of individuals, but it is developed on the basis of situations one finds oneself in and, above all, of the objectives that have to be achieved. In all of them, the common thread throughout my life, from direct and mid-level command to higher positions, has always been the need to set an example, i.e., experiencing in an exemplary fashion the same situations as those which the people one works with are asked to deal with. Also, competence, you must be a master of your art, be the best for those you command.

Commitment, in other words, being perfectly clear in one's mind that one is part of what one does and who one does it with. The ability to establish bonds of trust and, above all, the ability to communicate the purpose and the desired end result.

In this regard, who have been your role models, what leaders or important people have inspired you along the way?

In my first experiences as a young lieutenant, it was a rather charismatic, heroic leadership model, for example, Alexander the Great, an extraordinary level of commitment, direct, exemplary... With good and bad points, but hey, that's how life is...

At an intermediate level, when one is in charge not only directly, but through other people and there is a chance to positively influence them, a very clear example who was also linked to the military is Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, the "Great Captain", who had the mind of a true statesman.

And in the last stage, thinking about the models in which one exercises command and tries to do it well, it is achieved through more complex structures with a large number of people and top-level leaders with whom one must interact, transmitting a vision and

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projecting present situations into the future, conveying as best as possible why things are being done. Those models are, for example, the founding fathers of the European Economic Community; De Gasperi, Adenauer, Jean Monnet and Schuman, because they saw what no one else was able to perceive at the time and had the courage and intelligence to put it into practice.

Lastly, a very clear example who I have the deepest admiration for is Javier Solana, who was Secretary General of NATO and high representative of the European Union, as well as a Spanish Government minister, for his ability to rally people behind him in very complex situations, such as the Bosnian war or the Kosovo conflict. Ideas that were key to the resolution of that conflict, in addition to making us in Spain feel very proud.

We are experiencing a very complex social and political scenario, due to the conflict in the Middle East, the energy crisis stemming from the war in Ukraine and the geopolitical tensions between China and the US. What qualities should the leaders of the future have to attract stability and peace in these times of global crisis?

The first quality is vision, very clearly. A leader is a statesman who is practically the opposite of a politician, because statesmen work with an eye on coming generations and politicians focus on the forthcoming elections. These statesmen must have vision, i.e., the ability to perceive an agenda that no one else is capable of seeing, with a series of milestones that they are capable of transmitting and with that desired end result of why we are doing certain things, our final destination, and, for example, the kind of world I hope will exist in 2050.

And then, obviously, communication, in the sense of the capacity to influence and persuade, but not manipulate. This capacity to persuade others arises from the quality of the content of the message, from the clarity of the reasoning and from the target of achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of people. So they must have the ability to negotiate from an intelligent, pragmatic and achievable stance.

During your time at NATO you dealt directly with various geopolitical conflicts. **How do you think the commitment of Member States to the European Union has evolved in recent years? What are the challenges that you think the Union must face up to in the coming years, taking into account the conflicts that are breaking out in the Middle East?**

Sovereignty is an asset that is very difficult to relinquish, especially when it is associated with economic or defence security policies, since the ability to forge agreements is more complex and the proof is that there are conflicting interests within the Union.

Furthermore, the truth is that the European Union does not have the capacity to project power beyond its frontiers and if it had to project that power, it would use national capabilities. The European Union's defence security power are limited fundamentally to teaching and training.

The European Union does not have the strategic autonomy to be able to propose a third way as a solution to the Middle East conflict, and we could say that the solution to the conflict lies on the one hand with the United States, which has that capacity, and, on the other, with Iran, which has extraordinary influence over one of the parties to the conflict. Quite besides Israel, which has significant strategic autonomy and fixed supporters. And lastly, we have the asymmetry of the position of China and the Russian Federation, which seek equidistance, but usually leaning towards the Palestinian side of the equation.

A rapid succession of changes is currently sweeping across the political, geostrategic and technological stages and society in general and companies in particular need to be prepared if they are to address these changes successfully. **How can leaders motivate their teams to adapt to new domestic and international circumstances that have a heavy impact on their businesses?**

We must instil in the mentality of managers the reality in which we live, which not only speaks of stock market indices or balance of payment equilibrium, but also of the possibility of doing business based on an environment that goes beyond the mere economy and that corresponds to geopolitics or geostrategy.

The first thing you have to do is acquire knowledge, that is to say you cannot live with your back turned to a reality about which you have to ask for advice, in the sense that you have to generate scenarios, but

scenarios that business embedded in a reality that is much more complex.

And we must raise awareness about one facet of companies, of economic activities, and that is that they have tended so much towards specialisation that now they have to do the opposite, returning to a more humanistic approach and being able to define strategies that are not merely based on the bottom line.

In the current environment, technological capabilities and digitalisation have become a fundamental ally for countries' economic and social development. The European Union encourages investment in R&D&I and a fair climate and digital transition. In addition we pay particular attention to the fight against climate change and the protection of biodiversity. **In your opinion, how do you see public-private partnership helping to meet these challenges? What role do leaders have in the commitment not to leave anybody behind in this digital transformation?**

One thing is what we want and another thing is what we can get. When we ask for the impossible and delay the inevitable, we are merely deepening the consequences of failure. We must achieve what we can achieve with what we have, and the case of climate change is no exception. In other words, we cannot ask companies to make sacrifices in terms of competitiveness, for example, as this will come back to bite them in the short term, because productivity rates are going to fall, because their natural competitors will not be subject to such stringent regulation.

However, an ethical approach must be taken, because you cannot ask someone who has not yet carbonised to decarbonise.

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“A leader must have vision and communication and persuasion skills to bring stability and peace in a context of global crisis”

This change of paradigm also generates enormous opportunities for young people; however, they need to develop the competencies necessary to enter this new labour market. You are closely linked to the world of education, as you give presentations and attend conferences at many Spanish universities. **What educational and technical training challenges do we need to tackle in order to encourage talent fairly and avoid the digital divide?**

Talent is a personal quality and does not depend on IQ, wealth, or family environment. It is dependent on two things, one being intrinsic motivation, i.e., enjoying what you do, and the other being extrinsic, which is recognition by others of what is achieved and, in addition, it often hinges to a large degree on the level of resources made available.

There is no better investment than money spent on talent, and for this, you need to create space for freedom and initiative. Making talent a catalyst for everything is a sound leadership practice, allowing talent to attract talent and develop.

Although we are witnessing an ever-increasing female presence, in both the army and the business ecosystem, in decision-making areas, it is evident that in society there continues to be a significant glass ceiling that hinders the rise of women to positions of responsibility. **How can female talent be promoted in both the public and the private arenas?**

Talent is a quality of individuals, regardless of how they want to define themselves. It is true that we must eliminate the glass ceilings that have fundamentally been created through prejudice and that prejudice has its origin in certain urban legends that are anchored in the myth that women do not want to do STEAM-type degrees.

One must give them the right information at the right time so that they can make choices on equal terms. In other words, women and men are characterised in management positions by merit, capability, endeavour and achievement. When the conditions for access are the same, then we will have true equality and positions of responsibility will mirror society as a whole.

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And lastly, young people are once again the hardest hit by this new crisis marked by the conflict in the Middle East, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the acceleration of the digital revolution that has positive effects and also negative ones, such as disinformation. **What positive message would you send out to future generations?**

I would tell them that their education and training will enable them to change things if they are able to organise the world around them and collaborate with people capable of changing the world, because if anyone can, it will be them.

They must be very clear in their own minds that their commitment, skills and ethics will be the factors that enable them to shape their future.

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