

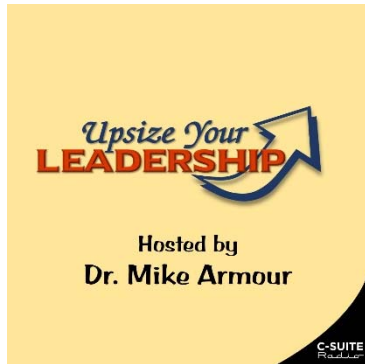
Courage

Leadership's Most Indispensable Virtue

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Everything which I undertake professionally has one primary purpose: to help people succeed by giving them clarity and insight. That's especially true of these podcasts. And today, we are talking about a trait which is absolutely necessary if you are to maximize your success as a leader.

In fact, all leaders who make a lasting impact have this one trait in common, not only those leaders who are paragons of good morals, but even leaders whom you would probably describe as wicked. So, join us for the next 20 minutes as we explore the one trait which you must embody if you are to Upsize Your Leadership.

About 20 times a year, I conduct trainings on leadership. The audiences are usually small enough that we can have considerable interaction and group discussion.

Early in the training, as a rule, I draw on a particular exercise. I ask the group to compile a list of qualities – virtues, if you would – which they associate with great leaders.

I've come to expect certain words which end up on the list time and again. Words like "honesty." "Integrity." "Good communicator." "Humility." "A people person." With a younger audience, the word "transparency" will usually come up rather early.

Once we've built a list of a dozen or so traits, I pose the question, "Of all the qualities of great leadership, which one, in your estimation, is the most important, the most vital?"

What follows is inevitably an intriguing discussion. Usually several people will volunteer answers. And if the group is small enough, I may even ask each person in the room for a response.

Not only that, with every answer I ask the person to offer his or her rationale for taking that position.

Only when the discussion starts to die down do I state my own viewpoint. Occasionally, someone in the group will have already built the case for the trait which I consider most vital. But that's not always the case. In fact, it's not even *usually* the case.

From the title of this podcast, you no doubt already anticipate which trait I consider most important, most vital. It's courage. Interestingly, when groups are compiling their list of leadership virtues, "courage" often goes unmentioned. For some reason, it does not readily come to people's minds. There are exceptions, of course, especially when the audience includes military veterans or first responders. Otherwise, courage is easily omitted from the discussion until I put the topic on the table.

I therefore find it necessary to offer an extended explanation of my own viewpoint, just as I've asked others to do. And I start my explanation by going back to the earliest records of leadership in human history. When we think of great leaders in the ancient world, who comes to mind? Most often it's someone who left a mark on history through personal involvement in combat. People like Julius Caesar. Or Alexander the Great. Or Hannibal. Or literary figures like Ulysses. Or people like Joshua, Gideon, or David in the Bible.

Now, these leaders operated in a combat environment completely removed from the way that we conduct military operations today. Modern technology allows deadly strikes on enemies who may be miles or even hundreds of miles away. That's a far cry from combat in the ancient and medieval era. In those days, combat was up close and personal. In most cases, warriors in the pre-modern era could look into the eyes of the person they were slaying.

And leaders were in the thick of things. Even the most senior leaders. They were on the front lines or just behind them, not miles away, poring over charts and maps as battlefield reports came in. They led by example, commonly by being at the head of a military charge themselves.

And this frontline involvement changed very little until the wars of the twentieth century. Prior to that time, technology did not allow senior commanders to run the battle from a remote location. You've seen this firsthand if you've ever watched a movie or a documentary about battles in the American Civil War. As was typical of warfare in the day, infantry units were lined up in a shoulder to shoulder formation. And where was their colonel, their general, their commanding officer? He was on a horseback, riding quickly up and down the line, barking orders. Without radio technology and with the horrendous noise of the battlefield, a commander could only convey his orders by moving rapidly from place to place on horseback.

Yet, when he was mounted on a horse, he was well off the ground, towering in the air behind his troops. That made him highly visible to the infantry on the other side. They had no difficulty in identifying him as the leader of the opposing army. His visibility made him an easy and inviting target. And a prized one, as well.

Military command was therefore not a vocation for the weak of heart. To lead demanded courage.

But someone may say, "That's all well and good, but I don't lead in a military organization. I lead a team of white-collar workers in an air-conditioned office tower. I don't see that courage is all that fundamental to my leadership responsibilities." So, let me address that objection. And let me do so by returning once more to ancient history, this time not to the field of battle, but to the streets of Athens.

Athens, as you know, was the birthplace of Western philosophy. And the most influential of its renowned philosophers was Aristotle. One of his primary concerns was how to live the most productive life, or what he called a virtuous life. This theme weaves through much of his writing,

particularly a work commonly referred to as the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Perhaps no other book on ethics has impacted Western civilization more than this one.

For me personally, the book has also had a profound influence. While reading it as a sophomore in college, I developed my first interest in philosophy, an interest which eventually led me to a doctoral degree in the intellectual history of Europe.

In his book on ethics (actually ten books bound in one volume), Aristotle argues that courage is the most important attribute of any virtuous life. To quote him precisely, “Courage is the first of human qualities, because it is the quality which guarantees the others.”

The essence of his argument is this. True virtue aims at producing a life which we might describe as upright. The world is beset, however, with forces which work at cross purposes to an upright life. They work continuously to thwart virtuous behavior and conduct. To withstand these forces and remain true to the pursuit of what is good, noble, and right, courage is essential. Otherwise, it’s easy to compromise on the standards of genuine virtue.

It’s safe to say, I believe, that Aristotle expected great leaders to exemplify an upright life, even though we have no passage in which he says so explicitly. I draw my conclusion from his extensive descriptions of good government and his denunciation of tyrants and unjust rulers. Whatever the form of government, he held, its goal should be to provide what is good and best for the people as a whole.

I can hardly imagine how leaders who lack virtue could achieve such an outcome, certainly over the long run. If an upright life is the proper goal of every person, no less should it be expected of leaders. And since courage is the cornerstone of the upright life, it is likewise the cornerstone of leadership.

After 50 years of working with men and women in key leadership positions, and after decades of personal experience in demanding leadership roles myself, I’ve seen the validity of Aristotle’s priority on courage. Over that period of time, I’ve watched many otherwise good leaders make serious and sometimes devastating mistakes simply because courage failed them at a pivotal moment.

And as a leader, I’ve faced the temptation to compromise on standards of upright behavior on more than one occasion. The temptation had leverage because something valuable was at stake. If I took what I knew to be the principled action, I risked the loss of a friendship. A job. A career. The survival of my organization. My reputation. My ability to care for my family.

Courage was required to overcome the fear associated with such threats. Now, fears like these can be thrust upon anyone, not just leaders. People who will never hold management or leadership positions have a calling to an upright life. They, too, can risk the loss of friendships, a career, or a reputation by pursuing what is right. Thus, the need for courage is not unique to leadership. But it is pivotal to the work of leaders.

Aristotle was intimately familiar with what we today call “leadership circles.” After all, he was the personal tutor of Alexander the Great and lived in the court of Phillip II of Macedon for seven years.

Yet, in his writings he rarely addresses the character qualities of the ideal leader. Perhaps his relative silence on the subject reflects an underlying view that the struggle to be upright is much

the same for everyone, leader or not. Leaders – especially prominent ones – may face ethical challenges which are more complex or larger in magnitude than those of ordinary citizens. But the principles for living an upright life are much the same for everyone.

For us today, however, when leadership is a widely-studied subject, there is a compelling reason to stress the need for courage on the part of leaders. Aristotle could not have envisioned a world so dependent on good management and leadership as ours is. By virtue of their position, leaders impact the lives of many people over and beyond themselves. And the higher a person rises in leadership, the more his or her actions either improve or diminish the lives of others.

Moreover, ours is a world in which people have tired of decisions made and actions taken purely on the basis of expediency and pragmatism. They long for leaders who have the courage to act on the basis of principles and values and to hold to those values with integrity.

But whether leaders have nobility of character or not, followers universally expect their leaders to demonstrate courage. Even though I promote leadership based on integrity, honesty, and decency, the truth is that from the earliest days of civilization, many powerful leaders with lasting impact have been corrupt, dishonest, and indecent. Men of this ilk have managed to muster hundreds of millions of people to support them.

Measured in terms of their following, these leaders were successful. They were able to achieve their goals without integrity. Without honesty and decency. Without even being moderately humane. But without courage, they would have accomplished nothing.

So far as I can tell, courage is the only trait which all decisive leaders share in common. As a leader you should therefore nurture courage to keep it strong and vibrant. Courage is not something that leaders need only at dramatic moments, such as leading troops into battle or making life-and-death decisions for a company.

Courage is equally called for in many of the most ordinary leadership responsibilities. The courage to have a tough conversation. The courage to make an unpopular decision. The courage to terminate a well-liked employee. The courage to admit a personal mistake. The courage to stand behind corporate decisions with which you personally disagree. The courage to intervene in an ugly interpersonal dispute among employees. The courage to uphold the dignity of an employee who is roundly disliked. The courage to protect a confidentiality, even though protecting it leads you to take actions which are misunderstood, ridiculed, or maligned by those who would be more supportive if they knew what you know in confidence.

In addition, courage is called for to make critical decisions in the midst of ambiguity. Or to make a decision when your choices are not between what's right and what's wrong, but instead a choice between the lesser of two evils. Or to make decisions which could trigger major unwanted consequences.

We could go on and on. The daily work of a leader demands a ready reserve of courage. Yet, not everything which passes as courage really is. The absence of fear, for instance, is not necessarily a sign of courage. Fear is often overcome simply through training.

To cite a simple example, consider people who are afraid to make electrical repairs in their home. Once they learn the basics of wiring and how to perform electrical repairs safely, they no longer have this fear. Training, not courage, has allowed them to put their fear behind them.

The absence of fear may also mean that someone is merely foolhardy or has an unduly inflated sense of confidence. People who have no fear are easily susceptible to rash, unwise decisions which can be harmful to themselves and to others.

Aristotle argued this very point. Even though he elevated courage to first position among the virtues of upright living, he held that some fears are helpful. They compel us to take risk into account when choosing a course of action.

The fear of a fire which threatens to burn down your house is a healthy fear, Aristotle would argue. So is the fear of someone who seems intent on harming your family. Such fears spur us into action to protect what we cherish.

So, the goal is not to be free of all fears, but to have the courage to confront fear and overcome it. Indeed, where there is no fear, no anxiety, no sense of an uncertain outcome, there is no courage. Courage is always a response to some threat, some unpromising possibility.

Aristotle viewed it as a median position between cowardice on one hand and foolhardiness on the other. Cowardice, courage, and foolhardiness are all possible responses to pronounced threats. Of the three, however, only courage is praiseworthy. No one respects a leader who is cowardly. No one trusts a leader who makes foolhardy judgments. Only the leader who meets challenge and adversity with courage gains a loyal following and rises to the true calling of leadership.

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