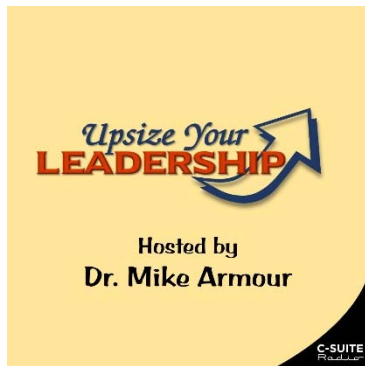# Character

## *The Cornerstone of Leadership Success*

### Hosted by Armour

### Episode UYL1913
### Podcast Date: August 20, 2019

A major study of executives, conducted at Harvard, concluded that 85% of a leader's success can be attributed, directly or indirectly, to his or her character. Warren Bemis' pioneering work on leaders in the 1980s reached a similar conclusion. A few years ago, a research team led by John Zenger and Joseph Folkman surveyed the performance of 26,000 managers and executives. They concluded that "personal character is the core of all leadership effectiveness."

But we are obviously speaking here of a certain quality of character. Everyone has character. Some simply have better character than others. So, what's the linkage between character traits and leadership success?

That's our topic today as we delve into one of the most important ways for you to Upsize Your Leadership.

---

"Character" is an interesting word in English. On one hand, it can refer to something substantive in our personal make-up. As noted in the introduction, there's compelling evidence that proper character is the most decisive factor in a leader's success, especially over the long run. And not the least of these qualities of character is being authentic and genuine.

On the other hand, "character" can refer to a role which someone plays in a dramatic production. In this case, the character presented is merely pretense. The actor is not genuinely the individual personified on stage. The actor may be very convincing in the portrayal. But it's pretense, all the same.

Unfortunately, the world has seen more than its fair share of leaders who faked a display of character, sometimes rather persuasively, and perhaps for long-periods of time. Yet, truth has a way of ultimately winning out. Countless people, with stellar records of accomplishment, have seen their reputation shattered because major flaws in their character came to the fore. Pete Rose in baseball is one example. Bill Cosby in entertainment is another. Bernie Madoff in business is still another.

Now, everyone of us has flaws in our character. None of us is the perfect embodiment of noble virtues. But some flaws are hindrances. Others are fatal. Some people are skilled at hiding fatal flaws, so that they achieve considerable success before the flaw reveals itself. Once the flaw

becomes evident, however, the individual may never recover the credibility or esteem which he or she once had.

That's disappointing enough in athletics or entertainment. But in leadership, when credibility is lost to character issues, it's tragic. A leader's influence rests on credibility. And once this credibility is tarnished, a leader's impact is impaired, if not destroyed altogether. No amount of talent, skill, or charisma can make up for lost credibility.

The word "character" itself has its origins in manufacturing, not personal psychology. The term traces back to ancient Greece. It was the name for the stamping device used to emboss the figure of a god, a ruler, or a cultural hero on a coin. The result was an enduring, somewhat permanent image on the coin.

It's not too much of a stretch, therefore, to think of character as something which is stamped on us. We are not born with it. We develop it, starting with our earliest childhood ability to understand right from wrong. Then, during what we call "the formative years," from childhood through adolescence, our character becomes more fixed, more defined, more fully characteristic of us.

This developmental process is one of the more significant ways in which personality and character differ. Much of our personality is with us from birth. Children manifest their unique personality at a very early age. Some are more outgoing than others. Some are more jovial than others. Some are more easy-going than others. Even before children can fully express themselves in speech, their basic personality is on display.

On the other hand, the child will be much older before we can begin to assess his or her character. That's because there is a moral component to character which is not an element in personality. We cannot truly ascertain character until a person is old enough to grasp moral and ethical choices and act on them.

Because of the moral component of character, we do not hesitate to judge someone's character as good or bad. That's a moral judgment. We don't think of personality in terms of whether it's good or bad, but in categories such as the person's energy level, confidence, optimism, sense of humor, friendliness, and what have you.

In a word, we are born with personality, but must develop character. This development is shaped by family outlooks, the values of society, religious formation, moral education, lessons we learn from experience, the values portrayed in entertainment, our choice of friends and heroes, and other external influences. From our reflection on these shaping forces, we reach certain convictions about life, about the world, and about other people. These convictions then become the foundation of our character.

Moreover, because outside influences play such a pivotal role in character formation, there is a certain situational component in how we define "good character" and "bad character." What is considered a positive character trait in one society may be seen elsewhere as unimportant or even undesirable.

In time-conscious Western societies, for example, punctuality is seen as a sign of good character. Elsewhere on the globe, insistence on punctuality is viewed as foolish enslavement to the clock. Or to cite another example, in American culture we question the sincerity of a person who does not look us in the eye when we talk. There are places in Asia, however, where

sustained direct eye contact is considered confrontational. Regularly averting your gaze is considered the more respectful behavior.

For this reason, leadership success turns in large measure on whether you embody character traits which are admired and considered desirable within the interpersonal framework in which you lead. This is particularly important for leaders to remember when they work in international settings or have foreign ethnicities on their team.

In my work as a leadership coach, I often have clients who are from Asia or the Middle East who are recent immigrants or who have come to the U.S. in management roles for an international company. When their company engages me as a coach, it's usually to help the person understand the expectations placed on managers in American culture. For many of these clients, one of the more difficult expectations for them to master is holding people accountable.

This is particularly true for people coming from social and cultural backgrounds where saving face is a paramount priority. To these individuals, being a person of good character means that you never cause people to lose face. Therefore, as part of their upbringing in their native culture, they learned to avoid confrontation. Confrontation might cause the other person to lose face. And if you cause someone else to lose face, you yourself lose face also.

From that perspective, holding people accountable – at least in the way that accountability is normally practiced in American corporate life – borders too closely on confrontation. When these clients start their coaching relationship with me, they are usually struggling as managers with both holding people accountable and being held strictly accountable themselves.

Now, in this example, notice how closely the concept of good character is based on beliefs. The truth is, character formation is primarily about the influence of beliefs. What we believe about honesty makes it an important character trait. What we believe about responsibility makes acting responsibly a vital character trait.

Unlike personality, therefore, we cannot talk about character without talking about beliefs and the values reflected in these beliefs. And because beliefs and values can change, so, too, can character. In many ways, character-building is a never-ending task. Even people with highly admired character traits continue to fine tune their character until the very end of life.

One reason for this is that character reveals itself most fully in times of stress and adversity. And because moments like these put character on bold display, they highlight weaknesses in our character. The longer we live, the more adversity we encounter, the more setbacks we experience, the more we can see places where our character needs to be stronger. More resilient. More solid.

In my leadership workshops I often ask the participants to write down seven character traits which they believe are highly important for leaders. Once their list is complete, I encourage them to select one of these traits which they want to improve personally.

Next, I have them list the names of people whom they see as exemplifying this quality. Then I ask them to compile a list of things which they can learn from these exemplary individuals.

For the final part of the exercise, I invite them to do a bit of self-assessment. I ask them to write out a description of how well they currently embody this trait. And then I have them identify specific ways in which they can strengthen it.

In its own way, this little exercise is a miniature version of how character was instilled in young people historically. Great figures of history were studied to identify their most notable traits of character in order for them to serve as role models for the student to emulate. Even though this approach to character formation predated him by centuries, Plutarch popularized it in the ancient world with his famous work entitled *The Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans.* For centuries after Plutarch's death, this work would be copied and recopied to meet popular demand.

Thus, when literature on how to be successful first appeared in American culture, books on the subject centered on building stellar character. As the twentieth century progressed, however, success literature focused increasingly on personality traits, not character traits. Charisma came to be celebrated. Books on self-improvement tended to lay out ways to create a more winsome personality rather than how to increase depth of character. An entire public relations industry emerged to help leaders manage their public image.

In addition, the rise of electronic media exaggerated the emphasis on personality. The ability to make a positive impression on radio or television became a limiting factor in how successful public leaders could be. Having an engaging personality, projecting likeability, and connecting with a vast, somewhat faceless audience were seen as critical components to success.

Concurrently (and not surprisingly given this emphasis on personality), character education fell into neglect. Hastening this neglect was the rise of moral relativism. Academia in particular began to reject the idea that one culture might be morally superior to another. Or more desirable than another. As the twenty-first century approached, the intellectual community saw fewer and fewer things as absolutely right or absolutely wrong.

Without a clear definition of morals and mores to abide by, character has no standards to which it can be held accountable. And in the absence of those standards, character education has little to build on. Yet, even moral relativists can't bring themselves to view such things as honesty, integrity, compassion, self-sacrifice, devotion to duty, commitment to fair play, conscientiousness, diligence, hard work, and peace-making as matters of indifference.

Neither can the average worker. Despite its inroads in Western culture, moral relativism has not been able to supplant the common notion that certain behaviors are inherently good, others are inherently bad. Or even evil. Thus, when asked to describe what constitutes good character, most people can respond readily with a fairly explicit list of qualities.

And they expect leaders to evidence these qualities. They want to know that leaders will protect and advance the values which they hold dear. If this commitment from their leaders is ever drawn into serious question, people will reciprocate by withholding their trust. And leaders who are not trusted will forever be limited in their effectiveness.

For anyone – and especially for leaders – two factors determine whether character will command respect. The first is how well the individual embodies the traits of good character. The second is the strength of character. Does the individual consistently evidence these character traits, whatever the circumstances, whatever the pressure, whatever the cost. One of the most important character traits is therefore courage, the courage to hold true to your values no matter what. Without it, compromises on character are all too easy to rationalize.

And when it comes to character, compromise is deadly. In our culture, few criticisms sting us more deeply than to be labeled a hypocrite. And the reason that we bristle at that label is that it

poses a grim threat to our personal credibility. Once we are viewed as hypocrites, we lose more than just our personal credibility. People will tend to be more dismissive of our viewpoint, our ideas, and the causes which we espouse. In effect, our leverage as leaders is sacrificed.

And to make matters worse, day-to-day speech has expanded the meaning of hypocrisy in recent years. Originally it meant to portray ourselves as something which we are not. The linguistic root of the word "hypocrite" comes from the Greek theater and the name used for an actor. An actor played the role of someone he was not.

But today, any departure from one's espoused standards of behavior is enough for someone to accuse us of hypocrisy. As a consequence, consistent lives of character are more vital to leadership now than ever before. Indeed, next to courage, consistency may be the second most important character trait. Without consistency of character, we cannot practice true integrity. And when integrity is weak, traits of good character like honesty, truth-telling, reliability, and impartiality are vulnerable.

Character education may have become less prevalent in American classrooms. But for leaders, building strength of character is fundamental in their preparation. Character, after all, is the cornerstone of leadership success.

————————————————————

*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

*Upsize Your Leadership* is a featured podcast on the C-Suite Radio Network ([https://c-suitenetwork.com/radio/shows/upsize-your-leadership/](https://c-suitenetwork.com/radio/shows/upsize-your-leadership/)). It can also be accessed on iTunes, Google Play, Stitcher, Spotify, and many other platforms which distribute podcasts.

Scripts for all episodes can be downloaded at [https://www.leaderperfect.com/podcast/episodes](https://www.leaderperfect.com/podcast/episodes).

————————————————————