

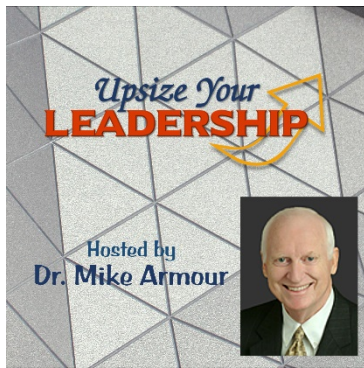
LEADERS

Guardians of Optimism

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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Over the next few minutes, I want to explore a topic which is always timely, but especially at this very moment. As a nation, as a society, as a culture we are experiencing a variety of developments which could easily make for despair. There's plenty of bad news to preoccupy us.

But the path out of bad times has never been blazed by pessimists. Optimism and hope are the antidotes to discouragement. And leaders must instill both, especially at times like these. As a leader, you may have never thought of yourself as a guardian of optimism. But I want you to consider that possibility with me today as we examine how to upsize your leadership.

My theme for today's podcast is quite simple. No duty of leadership is more important than remaining optimistic. People don't need any help being pessimistic. Nature has given us a brain which is hyper-attuned to threats. This gift from nature was no doubt a tremendous human asset when most of mankind lived in isolated, primitive settings, often in hostile environments, where the ability to recognize threats early was key to survival.

That's why courage and confidence have been celebrated in the hero stories of every civilization. Life is a battle against adversity. As adversities multiply, it takes a determined act of the will to remain courageous, hopeful, and confident in the face of so many threats.

Because we are so highly attuned to danger, we are vulnerable to becoming pessimistic when the going gets tough. We allow our minds to dwell on the possibility of unpleasant outcomes. We begin to feel powerless to change things. We settle for passive resignation to our circumstances, letting circumstances control us rather than the other way around.

That's where leadership is a game-changer. Leaders give people confidence and resolve to battle back. To make a difference. To believe in their ability to transcend adversity.

In order to succeed at this task, leaders must themselves be optimistic, so much so that it's almost wired into them. And that's the very type of leadership that we currently need in abundance. Leaders are the guardians of optimism.

When you look at what's going on these days, it doesn't take much to become pessimistic. In the past six months the world has seen a global economic collapse which staggers the imagination. In a matter of weeks, tens of millions of people in our country lost their jobs. Small businesses – the lifeblood of America's economy – have folded by the thousands. And several major companies have closed, as well.

In addition, the nation's most fundamental institutions are under attack. Its historic ideals have been hi-jacked and perverted to rationalize weeks of rioting and looting in major cities and even smaller ones. The voices behind this chaos call for anarchy and the complete destruction of the American system of government. As a nation, we've rarely been so polarized politically. The great divide which led to the Civil War may be the only comparable moment in American history.

So, with corona restrictions isolating us from one another and from our broader array of social contacts, it's easy to slip into negative thought patterns, and with them, pessimism. And my personal conviction is that we, as a nation, are more susceptible to pessimism than ever before. And that's because the general population knows so little of the past that we cannot benefit from what history offers to teach us. We can't see our current circumstances against the backdrop of how people prevailed in the past when such conditions arose.

For the most part, serious study of history has disappeared from secondary and collegiate study as a significant element in a student's education. In the 1970s, many colleges began to curtail the number of history courses required in the core curriculum. This trend accelerated in the 1980s and was soon adopted on campuses nationwide. From there it expanded into high schools. As a result, historical illiteracy is at an all-time high across America.

So, you might ask, what difference does that make? A huge one, in my opinion. It deprives us of perspective. Every serious adversity seems unprecedented to us because we personally have so little knowledge of similar occurrences in the past. We don't have the benefit of knowing how others have dealt with such moments and transcended them. Therefore, political, economic, and social threats are easily blown out of proportion in our minds.

Now, before I go further, I need to make full disclosure. I'm inclined to be biased toward the importance of history, since most of my degrees are in that field. On the other hand, it is this very knowledge of history which grounds my optimism, even in the most troubling times.

For one thing, what history shows us is how humanity has repeatedly risen above horrendous catastrophes. There is a resilience and an indomitability to the human spirit that serves as a solid foundation for optimism.

Perhaps there is no more striking example of this indomitability than the recovery from the Black Death of the fourteenth century. This plague – the largest pandemic in human history -- entered Europe in 1347 and hit its peak in 1349, although it persisted until 1353. Across western Asia, Europe, and north Africa there were somewhere between 75 and 200 million deaths from the disease. Scholars generally agree that literally one-third of the population of Europe died from the plague. Thousands of villages disappeared, never to be rebuilt.

Not only that, the disease was just as deadly to animals. Livestock were decimated on farms all across Europe. Worst of all, no one knew what caused the plague or how it was transmitted from person to person or region to region. Nor were the best doctors of the day able to devise an effective way to treat it or prevent it. Unlike COVID-19, which has a miniscule mortality rate

among children, the Black Death dealt a severe blow to the very young. They died from it in such numbers that some locales called it the Children's Plague.

Imagine how bleak the future must have seemed to people who lived in that era. Could human society even survive such devastation? It did survive, of course. And what a rebound! A mere 50 years later – that is, by 1400 – the Renaissance was emerging in full bloom, giving rise to the modern world. What followed was the most culturally creative century the world had ever seen. Beauty literally rising from the ashes.

All the more interesting, the Renaissance had its birth in Italy, where the Black Death had first entered Europe and where it levied some of its most deadly tolls. The city of Florence would lead the Renaissance, giving us such notables as Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Donatello, Brunelleschi and dozens of other cultural and literary icons. But in 1348, according to detailed city records, Florence lost 70 percent of its population to the plague.

To suffer such a blow, then rise so rapidly to spearhead the Renaissance demonstrates the resilience to which I refer when I speak of the indomitability of the human spirit. It was evident all across Europe and the British Isles in the aftermath of the Black Death. In one locale after another, unsung leaders refused to acquiesce to the hand which fate had dealt them. They fought back. And they rallied others to fight back alongside them.

Such determination in the midst of adversity does not arise out of pessimism. It comes from hope that tomorrow can be better. Great leaders have always stoked such hope. Only where hope prevails do we see the best in people. Hopeless people are not known for their courageous action, their self-sacrificing generosity, or their untiring dedication to the well-being of others. For communities to be loving, they must first be hopeful.

And people look to their leaders to exemplify and instill hope. To do so, leaders must be grounded in optimism themselves. I'm not talking about some type of Polly Anna, naïve view of life that sees everything through rose-colored glasses. Leaders must be realistic in their outlook or people will not put faith in them. And leaders cannot impart hope until people have faith in them. Being realistic, however, does not mean setting aside optimism. Realism merely defines the field of play in which optimism must operate.

Optimism looks at reality and asks, "Given where we are, what's our next step in moving forward?" One of my favorite stories from the D-Day invasion is the role of General Theodore Roosevelt, the son of President Theodore Roosevelt and the only general to go ashore with his troops on the first day of the D-Day landings. Wounds which he had received in the First World War left him dependent on a cane to walk. As he scurried up the beach with his men, it was immediately apparent that a mistake had occurred. The landing craft had put them out on the wrong beach, far distant from where they were supposed to be.

His senior officers quickly huddled around him and asked, "What shall we do?" Roosevelt famously drove the tip of his cane into the sand and said, "We start the war from right here." To paraphrase an old cliché, optimism does not focus on the hand it was dealt, but how it will play the hand.

None of us was born an optimist or a pessimist. Somewhere along the way we adopted an optimistic or pessimistic outlook. And practiced long enough, adopted outlooks become characteristic of us.

But unlike physical characteristics such as my height or skin tone, characteristic outlooks can be changed. As a leader, I must learn to set aside characteristic tendencies to be pessimistic. Otherwise, my leadership is compromised from the outset.

As with all attitudes, both optimism and pessimism are based on a certain set of beliefs. And these are beliefs that we choose, just as we do all beliefs. The choice may have been made unconsciously. But it is a choice, nonetheless. And because optimism and pessimism rest on beliefs, they are ultimately themselves products of our choices. That's why we are not bequeathed optimistic or pessimistic outlooks at birth.

Moreover, beliefs are based on evidence, not on hard-and-fast concrete facts. There is therefore no scientific method for proving that optimism or pessimism is more aligned with reality. From a purely scientific perspective, I could argue the case for pessimism as strongly as I can for optimism.

So why should I choose optimism over pessimism? For me, the answer is rather straightforward. When I look at what pessimism yields, it's not a particularly attractive picture. Pessimism paves the way for fears to take charge, individually and collectively. It constrains us on every turn, threatens us with feelings of futility, and minimizes our sense of options. Personally, that type of life is not very enticing.

I prefer a life where I'm confident that we can make a positive difference, where hope sustains us in moments of discouragement, and where we see the world brimming with promising opportunities. Pessimism narrows our sense of possibilities. Optimism enlarges them.

I don't have the option of choosing neither optimism nor pessimism. Life doesn't afford me that alternative. I must choose one over the other. And since I'm forced to choose, I opt for optimism.

Isn't that an interesting phrase: opt for optimism? Optimism multiplies options. And options multiply choices. Optimism therefore conditions us to be watchful for choices. If we aren't looking for choices, we can easily miss them when they arise. That's why a leader's optimism is essential not only for the leader, but for his or her people, as well. It enhances the likelihood of seeing worthwhile options which might otherwise go unnoticed.

America will rise to the challenges before it at present. I'm confident of that. An unpredictable economy will become less so. Job markets will stabilize. Uncertain futures will become more certain. The love of what's right will triumph over efforts to toss aside what's good, decent, and uplifting.

In the end, the forces of order will prevail over the forces of disorder, disarray, and division. Eventually sound heads and sound thinking will prevail. I have every hope that leaders will emerge, just as they did in the wake of the Black Death, to point us forward – leaders whose unshakeable optimism sparks the indomitable spirit that is inherent in the human race. Leaders are guardians of optimism and its first line of defense.

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.

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