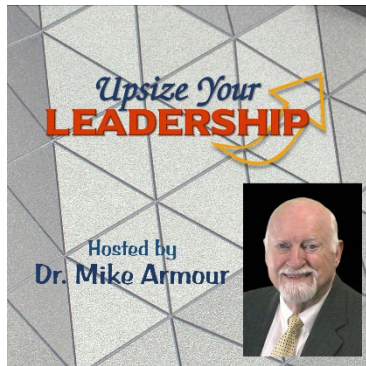


In Leadership, Credibility Reigns

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What's the one thing – more than any other – which will limit your impact and influence as a leader? It's not charisma. It's not subject matter expertise. It's not even your communication and people skills. It's your credibility. If you are going to be successful as a leader, people must find you credible in three specific arenas of your personal and professional life. And that's our subject today.

People step into leadership because they want to get something done that requires the support and cooperation of others. They must rally people to their endeavor. But they cannot compel people to join the effort. They gain a following only by exerting personal influence. And they gain influence by

demonstrating credibility.

In this episode we're going to delve into the specifics of how leaders build influence and maintain it by maximizing their credibility. Stay with us for the next fifteen minutes as we explore one of the most powerful ways to Upsize Your Leadership

It goes without saying that people who are untrusted have little personal influence in the truest sense of the word. They may be in a position of power which allows them to compel compliance with their directives. But their influence is minimal.

Leaders, on the other hand, may not hold a position which gives them the authority to demand compliance. Think of a woman putting together a volunteer association to address some pressing need in the community. We rightly describe her as leading the effort. But she has no power to force people to follow her lead. She gains support only by maximizing her influence.

And what gives her influence? In a word, it's her perceived credibility. A leader who loses credibility loses his or her ability to rally people around the leader's vision, then motivate them and mobilize them to achieve it.

As leaders, therefore, it behooves us to understand the role of credibility in our effectiveness. But the same can be said of people who are not leaders. Any person enhances his or her personal influence by building a reputation for credibility. What sets credibility for leaders apart from the credibility which anyone else strives to maintain?

To answer this question, I want to look at credibility in three different arenas of life: the social arena, the professional arena, and the leadership arena. And for this discussion, I'm going to use the words "credibility" and "trust" somewhat interchangeably, even though they are not truly synonyms. To the degree that I see someone as having credibility, I will tend to trust them. And to the degree that I trust them, they have the ability to influence me.

Character Credibility

That being said, let's look at credibility in the first of our three arenas: the social arena. In order for me to trust someone in a social context, they merely need to consistently demonstrate that they are a person of good character. They have credibility in the realm of character.

So, let's imagine that you and I get to know each other at a networking event. Later we bump into each other at a convention and have coffee together. Even though we may not become close friends, through a series of social interactions I come to see you as a person of character.

Now, suppose that weeks later we are again both at a networking event. Our paths have not crossed during the socializing, but you want to be sure you speak to me before you leave. On your way to the door, you come over to me, greet me, and say, "It's great to see you. I hate that I have a pressing appointment at the office and only have time to say a hurried, 'hello.' I really have to be underway right now."

Then suddenly, a look of shock goes over your face. "Oh, no," you say. "I rushed out of the office so quickly to get here that I left my wallet lying on the desk. I don't have the money to get out of the parking garage."

Because I trust you, I may well pull out my own wallet, hand you a \$20 bill, and say, "Repay me whenever you have a chance," confident that you will indeed repay me. As we have come to know each other, I've developed trust in your character. It has credibility.

Competence Credibility

But now, let's shift to a different scenario. Say that you are my dentist or a surgeon scheduled to perform a medical procedure on me or a member of my family. In this context, I clearly want you to have credibility in terms of character. I certainly don't want you inflating my bill with unmerited charges just to put more money in your pocket. But I also want to feel assured that you are fully trained and skilled in the procedure which you are about to perform.

In other words, when a relationship is professional rather than social, trust in the other person's character is important, but not the only consideration. Even more essential is demonstrated competence. Who has certified them to perform this procedure? How many times have they done it? What's their success record with it? Do they have any outstanding judgments against them for malpractice?

If questions like these cannot be answered to my satisfaction, the other party's credibility comes into question and I withhold my full trust accordingly.

Leadership Credibility

Which brings us to credibility within the leadership arena. Ideally, leaders should be people of high character. Of course, many successful leaders in history have not lived up to this ideal.

They have been people of rather despicable character. And we will have more to say about that in a minute. But given the choice, most of us are more inclined to follow a person of character than a person whose character is questionable.

Leaders must also have credible competency in the arena in which they are leading. We are not likely to make someone the manager of a high-tech manufacturing plant whose only prior management experience is running a neighborhood restaurant. Such a person may have high competence and credibility in managing a restaurant. But in the context of a manufacturing line, the person has no demonstrated ability and thus no credible competence.

Beyond credible character and competence, however, leaders must demonstrate credibility in a third realm. They must be able to achieve the concrete results which their leadership is expected to provide. I use the phrase “concrete results” to emphasize that leaders are not judged on their effort or their vision. They are measured by whether or not they were able to achieve tangible, desirable outcomes.

If leaders fail to achieve desired results, their credibility as a leader is impaired. They may still be trusted as a person of character. They may still be seen as professionally competent. That is to say, they may still be trusted socially and professionally. But because they have lost credibility for obtaining concrete results, trust in them as a leader dissipates.

A classic example of this is John Scully, whose exceptional record as the CEO of Pepsico landed him the job of succeeding Steve Jobs at Apple. Through his exceptional marketing know-how, Apple’s financial strength grew immensely. But then he made a series of decisions which proved both strategically financially disastrous. As a result, he was relieved of his post in 1993 and Steve Jobs retook the helm.

Scully’s removal was no reflection on his character or his competence. He would go on to decades of exceptional success in the high-tech arena. But in the context of where Apple was at that point in its evolution, Scully failed to achieve the concrete results which the board and investors expected. Thus, he lost credibility as Apple’s leader.

Why Dictators Are Not Leaders

For a leader, indeed, the ability to get concrete results is decisive. As I noted earlier, there have been some very successful leaders, including some of the worst tyrants in history, who were not particularly people of noble character. In fact, quite the opposite. But they were able to retain power and influence because of what they were able to achieve for those who followed.

In the wake of national humiliations, nations have been known to rally behind autocratic, authoritarian leaders who helped them regain a sense of national pride, even though the leader or the leadership circle were sorely lacking in character. Two striking examples are Hitler’s rise to power in the aftermath of Germany’s crushing defeat in the First World War and Putin’s ascendancy to power in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Both men quickly proved themselves capable of heinous acts. But they retained a loyal following because they eased the nation’s psychic pain from humiliating reversals.

Above all else, therefore, leaders must achieve concrete results. I say this, not to condone leaders of poor character. Rather, I’m simply saying that character and competence alone cannot assure trust in a person’s leadership. I would also add that leaders who combine

character with competency and concrete results are the ones most likely to create healthy, resilient, robust organizations and communities.

Poor character on the part of a leader inevitably hampers essential communication. Fear or uncertainty as to how the leader will react stifles timely, open discussion of difficult issues. Certain topics are clearly off the table, because raising them entails too much risk. Many a dictator has met a disastrous end because his closest advisors became fearful of telling him the truth.

Toward the end of the Second World War, Hitler was moving army divisions and air force squadrons around on the map, with generals standing nearby unwilling to tell him that those units no longer existed. Fifty years later, Saddam Hussein's inner circle withheld the truth from him about American and Allied battlefield success until his capital was surrounded and about to fall.

These may be extreme examples, I know. But extremes highlight dynamics which are always present, even if they do not call attention to themselves in more routine settings. I would also say that at the apex of their success, people like Hitler and Saddam were no longer leaders in the true sense of the word. They were dictators. Leaders, we have said, gain compliance through their influence. Dictators gain compliance through force. Dictators gather an initial following through leadership. But once they have sufficient power, they turn to reliance on their power, not their influence, to achieve their designs.

Genuine leadership, therefore, strives for credibility in terms of character, competence, and concrete results. It knows that all three must team together to provide a sure footing for leadership to stand on. Ultimately leadership effectiveness rests on trust. And trust rests on credibility.

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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