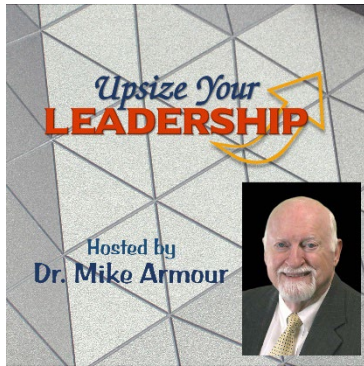


Lights Up! It's Showtime for Leaders

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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Lately I've been working on a new keynote speech on leadership. The working title is "Lights Up! Your On Stage!" Today I want to share some of the thoughts which I'm weaving together as part of this speech.

Many of you know that I got thrown into heavy-duty leadership roles at a fairly young age. I was a college dean in my mid-thirties, a college president by the time I was 37. Most of what I know about leadership came from learning on the job.

In today's episode, I'm focusing on core lessons which I learned early about leadership. And far more often than I like to admit, I learned the lessons in the wake of some telling mistakes. Interestingly, I had been previously warned about some of these mistakes and went ahead and made them anyway. Now it's my time to warn others. Heed these warnings and you're certain to Upsize Your Leadership.

I worked my way through the first two years of college by building sets and managing the lighting for the school's drama department productions. This was long before the advent of small computers, so we had none of the digital magic of today's theatrical lighting effects. I worked with controls which were large, bulky, and cumbersome.

My domain was backstage, just off of the main curtain, standing at a massive control panel which was wired to every light in the show. The machine itself had a dozen or so huge rotary rheostats, each with an eight-inch long handle which was used to position the rheostat precisely to generate the desired lighting effect for each scene. For lengthy shows – especially musicals – there were dozens of lighting changes, each to be executed precisely on cue. I therefore spent the entire show pushing and pulling the control handles, all the while following the action on stage intently so as not to miss my cues. By the final curtain, I was usually pretty exhausted, but I enjoyed every minute of it.

I particularly remember the adrenalin rush which swept over me when the overture began. My first cue was only moments away. As the overture reached its final bars, I readied myself for the next words in my headphones, the director barking the order, "Lights up! It's showtime."

My lightboard was right at the place where actors and actresses positioned themselves before stepping on stage. I was close enough to them to sense their excitement and occasional stage nerves, especially on opening night. For many of these aspiring student performers, this was

their first time ever on such a big stage. Among them, however, there were one or two who, on that opening night, would make a striking transformation.

Although they had done respectable work during rehearsals, it was nothing exceptional. But now that it was showtime, they became a different person. They stepped on stage with a focus which was sharper and more intense. They moved and spoke with a new level of energy. They nailed their role in a manner that none of us in the cast or crew had anticipated – including them.

Today I use what I saw in them to help leaders understand their responsibilities more fully. You see, for those performers, very little separated the live performance from the preceding weeks of rehearsal. The cast was the same. The lines were the same. The sets were the same. The lights were the same. Only one thing was different –the watchful eye of an audience. An audience which they could barely see in the glare of a brightly lit stage. But the simple awareness of those watchful eyes was enough to bring out their best.

As leaders, most of us can remember the experience of stepping into our first major leadership position. To a greater or lesser extent, we felt our own version of opening night jitters. How would we perform? Would we nail our role? Would we draw applause along the way? Would we at least avoid embarrassing ourselves when the bright lights were on us?

Almost all of us stepped onto the leadership stage for the first time with some version of these questions running through our mind. As a leadership coach, I've learned that I can't always predict which newly-minted leaders will nail their role and which ones will merely go through the motions of leading. Again, it's like those students on opening night. I learned to anticipate that one or two of them were about to perform as they never had before. But I could never tell you in advance who they were.

But this I did learn. The ones who transformed on stage were motivated by the unseen, watchful eyes in the audience. They knew that every nuance of what they did was on full display. Even when they were far from the center of attention on stage, they stayed in character just as fully as if they were in the spotlight. They acted as though every eye was on them.

Leaders need a similar perspective. They are being watched, constantly, whether they always see the audience or not. People are quietly taking note of what the leader does. How the leader behaves. How the leader reacts. They are forming their own opinion about whether the leader is genuinely a person of character. Whether the leader's actions align with the values and attitudes which the leader demands of others. Whether the leader consistently shows good judgment. Whether the leader is caring. Wise. Even-handed.

Leaders must therefore see themselves stepping on stage every day. And not for some quick, token appearance. No, their time on stage is more akin to the role of Susanna in Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro*. The opera encompasses four acts which require three hours to perform. And the singer playing Susanna rarely gets a break. She appears in almost every scene and her role must carry the show's energy from beginning to end.

Our daughter once played the role of Susanna. And just weeks after landing the part, she discovered that she was pregnant. In most productions of Figaro, Susanna wears a tight bodice, whose stiff bindings pose a challenge for the singer to draw deep breaths. Being pregnant only compounded the challenge. Still, our daughter mustered a masterful performance. For her, when the lights go up, it's showtime.

For leaders, our daughter's experience is a splendid metaphor. Leaders should anticipate that they are to be on stage, every day, for the entire day, expected to carry the energy throughout. And they are expected to nail their performance, no matter how they feel at the moment. It's a tall order.

For that reason, leaders must begin every day with an imperative to self, "Lights up! It's showtime!" I've conditioned myself to do this at the mirror while shaving. Women may want to do it while combing their hair to start the day. I would suggest a similar ritual for you. Find some routine part of the morning – preferably while you're looking at yourself in a mirror – to say to that you staring back from the mirror, "The lights are about to go up! It's showtime!"

Why moments at a mirror? Because they so closely resemble a performer's preparation in the dressing room. The performer stares into a well-lit mirror, putting on a stage face, knowing that soon the curtain will rise. You're doing much the same as you stare into your morning mirror. You're putting on the face which today's audience will see. What a perfect time to remind yourself afresh that, in short order, you step on stage. You're only minutes away from showtime!

Before I go further, however, I should probably address a potential misunderstanding. Just because I'm using a stage metaphor for leadership does not mean that I'm suggesting that you put on an act when you step on stage as a leader. Theater audiences are pretty astute at picking out actors who are not particularly convincing or believable in their role. People do the same with their leader. They are good at recognizing insincerity or pretense in a leader's performance.

So, I'm not suggesting that you put on an act. I'm simply encouraging you to step on stage with the very best version of who you are. If I could borrow another analogy, imagine that someone throws a magnificent dinner to give you a special award. Hundreds of people attend. And because you are the guest of honor, you are seated prominently at the head table. You're the center of attention. Everyone can see you, and at one time or another, everyone has their eyes on you. You're not always certain as to who is watching at a given moment. But you realize that your everything you do is on full display.

In a setting like this, how are you likely to conduct yourself? You're probably going to be on your best behavior. You will arrive neatly dressed. You will be courteous and polite. You will follow proper etiquette. You will be genuinely warm and attentive to people who start a conversation with you. You will be pleasant and controlled. You will watch your language and guard your tongue. In a word, you will embody the very best of who you are.

And there's nothing hypocritical about doing so. What you are displaying is a genuine facet of yourself. You're not pretending to be someone you are not. You're simply opting to wear your best face. Heaven knows, we all have other faces which we are practiced at wearing. But for an occasion like this, only our best face will do.

Your daily leadership role is every bit as important as any appearance as a guest of honor. Far more is at stake . . . for you, for your people, for your organization. Every morning your audience awaits. What will they conclude about you and your leadership from your performance today?

What they conclude will be determined by what I call the "optics of leadership." As leaders, we live constantly under both a microscope and a magnifying glass. And as a rule, the larger our

leadership role, the more minutely the microscope probes and the bigger our actions appear under the magnifying glass.

If that sounds confusing, let me expand on what I mean by the “optics of leadership.” Our actions and decisions as leaders always carry implications for our people. And if our leadership role is quite substantial or broad, these implications can be highly consequential. Our people therefore have much at stake in determining what we are up to. What are our intentions? Where do we seem to be headed? Why are we doing what we are doing? What’s the meaning behind this or that policy or pronouncement?

To answer questions like these, our people continually dissect our actions and parse our statements. They are like theater critics sitting in the audience, taking note of even minute details. If people trust us, they will normally give us the benefit of the doubt as they probe these questions. If they distrust us, however, they may not be so generous in their assessment.

And once their misgivings about us grow in number, they put us under a microscope. Our every movement, our every comment is subject to scrutiny and examination. Our people read between the lines of what we say.

At the same time, our position of leadership puts us under a magnifying glass which makes what we do bigger than life. It’s the theater equivalent of people in the audience watching a performance through opera glasses. They can pick out details in a performer’s makeup and costume that even those in the front seats may fail to see.

Under the magnifying glass, our faults as leaders become more visible, our weaknesses more glaring. Personal slights become more upsetting. Lapses of good judgment become more obvious, any inconsistent behavior more apparent.

This magnifying effect is so great indeed, that at top levels of management and leadership, we must be especially guarded about what we say or what we do. I learned this the hard way in my first day on the job as a college president.

In my previous position at a major university, I had worn several hats. One of them made me a special assistant to the president. When he learned that I was resigning to take the presidency of a small liberal arts college, he volunteered an afternoon of his time to offer advice on how to avoid mistakes which he himself had made as a leader.

His second point of counsel was, “Always remember that as the president, your words carry a weight which they’ve never had before. You like to make little one-line, humorous remarks,” he said. “Be careful about that going forward, because people will take your jokes as an order.”

I thought I fully understood what he meant. Not so. I arrived on my new campus in the final two weeks of summer vacation. I quickly settled into my office then took a tour of the campus with the vice-president for finance and administration. Our first stop was a men’s dorm, where every worker in facility maintenance was busily sprucing things up for the arrival of the first students within a week.

From there we made our way to new tennis courts under construction. Our route carried us through a thirty-foot-wide passage between the administration building and the fieldhouse. A window in my office suite looked out on an ornate fountain which sat at the heart of this passageway. As we passed the fountain, I noticed a flower bed alongside the fieldhouse where

dandelions were in full bloom. I jokingly quipped, “Well, it looks like the dandelions won that battle!”

Two hours later, I was back in my office and happened to walk over and look out the window at the fountain. There, down on their knees, were half the workers who had been painting the dorm, now hurriedly digging up dandelions. My joke had become an order. Suddenly I had a far deeper grasp of what my mentor had meant.

It was a pivotal learning experience for me. From that moment on, I’ve never forgotten that my words, my actions, and even my off-hand remarks as a leader are under a magnifying glass. And what I’ve learned over the years is that this magnifying glass puts the leader’s personal flaws on enlarged display. The larger our leadership role, the more readily our flaws are evident.

As a leadership coach, I often find myself working with clients with personal traits which fall short of the ideal for a leader. It may be some weakness in character, inadequate self-discipline, a tendency to cut corners ethically, too much need for control, obvious insecurities, a curt manner with employees – the list goes on and on.

At lower levels of management, these shortcomings may be aggravating to peers and direct reports, but they are not necessarily career killers. As a result, these clients sometimes feel no urgency to overcome these less-than-ideal aspects of their makeup.

I nonetheless urge them to put these drawbacks behind them. I talk to them about the magnifying glass. The higher you go in management, I say, the more the job will give you a chance to showcase your strengths. But at the same time, higher management does not minimize your weaknesses. It magnifies them. And once the magnifying glass reveals your flaws, the more often people will put your leadership under a microscope and start second-guessing you and your performance.

No matter what your level of leadership, therefore, be preparing yourself now to go under a larger magnifying glass in the future. Under a more probing microscope. Look at yourself honestly, humbly. What characteristic traits do you have that would adversely impact your influence under more exacting optics of leadership.

The optics of leadership are neutral. The magnifying glass enlarges our flaws, but it can enlarge our strengths, as well. The microscope can raise questions about our true nature or it can validate that our strengths are rooted in genuine character, wisdom, and humility.

Our calling as leaders is to give both the magnifying glass and the microscope as little adversity as possible to focus on. Like one-eyed jacks in a deck of cards, we all have a side of our personality which we would like to keep from general view. We are not being hypocritical in putting our best face forward. We have no choice but to show a face. And since we are all multifaceted, why not strengthen our impact as a leader by choosing the best one possible.

And the surest way to do that is to see ourselves as forever on stage or standing in the wings making ready to step on stage. In either case, our watchword must be, “Lights up! It’s showtime!”

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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