

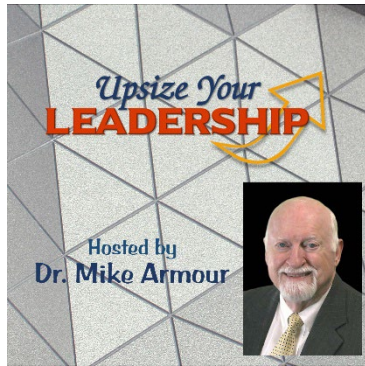
# Leadership Lessons from the Ukraine War

## A Contrast in Leadership Styles

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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Over the past few weeks, I've had several requests from listeners to do a follow-up on two podcasts back in February and March. They coincided with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In fact, I released the first podcast the day that Russia invaded.

For years I headed an international non-profit with offices and distribution centers in major cities across both Russia and Ukraine. In those podcasts, therefore, I offered some predictions about how the conflict would unfold, based on what I know about the difference between the prevailing mindsets of Russians and the characteristic mindsets of Ukrainians.

In particular, I predicted that the world would be surprised at the resistance which the Ukrainians would put up and the ingenuity and resolve which they would show on the battlefield. I had no idea exactly how the fighting would unfold or play out. But I knew that the patriotic fervor in Ukraine would generate a vigorous and spirited resistance.

Thus, my focus was more on how attitudes, outlooks, and morale would shape the conflict, not so much on the political or military aspects of the war. And I also stressed the difference in leadership styles which would become evident as the war wore on.

Now, six months later, the things which I predicted have proven fundamentally correct. And that is why some of you have asked me to offer an updated perspective on the war in Ukraine. As I've considered that request, I thought I could best honor it by talking about the contrast in leadership styles which we've seen on the two sides of the conflict. There could not be a sharper contrast between the two styles. Beyond that, I want to explain what gives rise to these differences. There are leadership lessons aplenty to be drawn from this war, especially if your goal is to upsize your leadership.

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As many of you know, much of my life has been spent in a naval uniform – 35 years of total active duty and reserve service, the bulk of that time in naval intelligence. And as a historian by training, I hold a master's degree in military and diplomatic history.

For me, therefore, it's quite natural to look at what's currently happening in Ukraine through both the eyes of an intelligence analyst and the eyes of a historian. As a result, I've been asking myself of late, what will we remember historically from the war in Ukraine? Whatever it's final

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outcome, what will historians – especially military historians – hold out as valuable lessons learned from the conflict?

For example, the Ukrainian counteroffensive which retook Kharkiv will be studied in war colleges for decades to come. It was brilliantly executed and may well prove to be the point at which the course of the war changed. In a clever ruse, the Ukrainian government talked openly about plans to launch a counteroffensive in the south, around Kherson and Mykolaiv. Both have ready access to the sea. And because Ukraine had already lost access to all of its ports except Odessa, it stood to reason that the Ukrainians would put a priority on retaking Mykolaiv and Kherson as strategic outlets to open water.

But Ukraine did not merely talk the talk of a southern counteroffensive. They began moving personnel and equipment into position for such an attack. Sensing an eminent attack, the Russians, felt it necessary to shore up their defenses in the south. So, they relocated large numbers of their most experienced fighting forces. These units had been near the border with Belarus to the north. Now the Russians moved them to reinforce the Russian presence in the south.

Once those Russian forces were withdrawn from the north, leaving the area lightly defended and in the hands of less experienced troops, Kyiv unleashed what it had been planning all along – a counteroffensive in the north. They quickly retook Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, and triggered a panicked Russian retreat which left behind vast amounts of weaponry and ammunition, not to mention hundreds of dead soldiers.

Unless you have an extensive military background yourself, it's hard to comprehend what a masterful stroke this was. Places like the Naval War College, where I did graduate work, will use this operation as a case study in strategic planning and operational security for many years to come.

No nation pulls off such feats, however, without exceptional leadership. And from a leadership standpoint, nothing stands out more starkly in Ukraine than the absolute contrast between the way that the opposing forces have approached leadership.

Two well-known images from the war will forever symbolize this contrast. One is the picture of Putin, in suit and tie, meeting with his advisors at a monstrous table in the Kremlin. He is seated at one end. And on the other end, over 20 feet away, are the people with whom he is meeting. Compare this to the image of Zelinsky which the world will remember. In a non-descript olive drab T-shirt. Frequently mingling freely with soldiers on the battlefield. Walking the streets of devastated villages. Sending video messages nightly to the citizenry to keep them informed and to shore up morale.

This same contrast in leadership styles is evident everywhere on the battlefield. The Russian army subscribes to the age-old Russian military doctrine of winning by exerting brute force. That was the Soviet approach, and post-Soviet Russia has never abandoned it. Their strategies call for moving troops forward only after intense artillery and aerial bombardment have totally pulverized the location where the defenders are holding out. You've seen this in the endless stream of photographs of towns and villages subjected to Russian attacks which left most buildings flattened and those which remained all but uninhabitable.

The Ukrainians, on the other hand, fight by cunning maneuver, flanking attacks by small bands of fighters who can move quickly, who can hit and run, who probe and probe enemy lines until

they find a weak spot which they can exploit. And they are also given to improvised tactics which capitalize on local ingenuity. In my podcasts earlier this year, I said that the world would be surprised at the level of ingenuity which the Ukrainians would demonstrate. I based my prediction on years of working alongside them.

Let me cite just one example of this war-fighting ingenuity. One of the major news channels recently took cameras inside a building less than a quarter of a mile from the battle front. Ukrainian teenagers were using this tiny hut to manufacture make-shift weapons to be immediately deployed. They had built a fleet of cheap drones – the kind you can buy for a few hundred dollars in many retail stores. They had also figured out how to use these cheap drones to drop grenades on enemy positions. They took standard grenades, equipped them with tail fins so that they would fall nose down when released from the air, then affixed them to the underside of the drone. They modified the grenades so that they would explode on making contact with a solid object.

The commander of this operation (if you could call him that) was a 19-year old computer nerd. And few of his compatriots were much older. Their little assembly line was so simple that they could quickly pack up and move to a new location as Ukrainian forces advanced.

The striking difference between how Russia and Ukraine are prosecuting this war is an extension of the way that they envision leadership. For centuries, the Russians have known nothing but authoritarian rule. The czars, Soviet dictators, and more recently Putin himself have governed through fear and intimidation. We associate Russia's Gulag prison camps with the Soviet era. But czars had been banishing political opponents to isolation in Siberia long before the communist revolution.

For millions of Russians, the only image of leadership they know is authoritarian, unilateral, top-down rule. Younger Russians – those born in the last 25 years – have enough internet savvy and have traveled abroad enough that many of them are conversant with other models of leadership. But by and large, Russians envision political leadership (and even organizational leadership) as distinctly authoritarian.

That's one reason that we as Americans would be naïve to think that if Putin were to be toppled, we would see warmer relationships with Russia and a less bellicose Russian government. That's not a foregone conclusion. Whenever Putin no longer holds the reins of power, his successor is likely to be another autocrat. In fact, when informed sources speculate about Putin's possible successor, the names most commonly put forth are men who are just as bellicose as Putin – in several cases, even more so.

To understand this gravitation toward authoritarian leadership, you have to put yourself inside the historic outlook of the Russian people. Whereas we as Americans have never seriously confronted the prospect of a foreign invasion since the War of 1812, Russians look at their history through the prism of centuries of invasion. Their national psyche took root in the wake of the Mongol invasion which overran the entire country and held it under their sway for 240 years.

Eventually, Russia prevailed in ridding itself of the Mongol yoke. That ushered in the era of the czars from Ivan the Terrible to Peter the Great to the empress Katherine the Great. Under the czars, though, Europe did not hesitate to turn on Russia, most notably in Napoleon's deadly invasion. It captured Moscow and took the life of nearly 300,000 Russian soldiers, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of their compatriots who were wounded and the massive loss of life on the part of civilians.

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In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an even more devastating invasion occurred when Hitler broke his compact with Josef Stalin and unleashed his armed forces against Leningrad and Stalingrad. This time the casualties totaled in the millions.

When I was working in Russia, what I found was an entrenched paranoia in the Russian psyche. Although they have ultimately overthrown invaders like the Mongols or defeated invaders like Napoleon and Hitler, they have done so at ungodly costs. At one time or another, their neighbors both east and west have turned against them. They therefore harbor an instinctual distrust of outside powers. The result is paranoia.

Paranoia, of course, is a type of fear. And when people are fearful or feel insecure, they look for strong leaders who can give them some assurance of safety. They are willing to look the other way if the leader is heavy-handed or even ruthless at times. Heavy-handedness and ruthlessness are signs of the ruler's strength and willingness to use it. That strength is reassuring.

Now, if you rule through fear, ruthlessness, and heavy-handedness, you always fear revolt against your leadership. To minimize that risk, you keep power centralized. You restrict major decision-making only to yourself or to a small circle of trusted lieutenants. And anyone in that circle who evidences even the least disloyalty is quickly removed from power, if not summarily dispatched.

This need to control independence to make decisions has a telling impact on how decision-making is delegated in the military. If an autocratic leader has anxiety about a popular revolt, how much more so is he anxiety-ridden about a revolt in the military. It's in the ruler's interest, therefore, to hold all military decision-making at the top, where he can keep an eye on everyone with the authority to make critical decisions.

As a result, the Russian army does not have a strong corps of non-commissioned officers, as we have long taken for granted in our own armed forces. And even their commissioned officers have no battlefield decision-making authority until they rise to very senior ranks. Every decision of consequence must be approved by very high command before it can be carried out.

This is why so many Russian generals have been killed on the frontlines of this conflict. They have to be in the middle of the action to make the necessary battlefield decisions – even on things like whether troops can mount an attack on a sudden target of opportunity or take steps to eliminate a newly discovered artillery emplacement. Even if Russian positions are being overrun, only generals can order a withdrawal to a more defensible position.

In a word, the top echelon of command is responsible for making both strategic decisions and tactical decisions. Not so with the Ukrainians. They have modeled their military on patterns in the West, where officers on the front line are fully entrusted with power to make tactical decisions. Ukrainian forces are free to innovate in the heat of battle, and do so immediately, based on what they see immediately in front of them. And because this authority is so broadly distributed, they are able to fight in small, agile, fast-moving combat units.

Given the historic and linguistic ties between Russia and Ukraine (Moscow was originally established as an outpost of the government in Kyiv), why such a difference in how leadership is exercised on the battlefield? It goes again to a national psyche.

For hundreds of years, Ukraine has lived under the thumb of one empire or another. The Ottoman empire. The Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Russian Empire. Then the Soviet Union. They have had only brief respites of true independence as a country. Moreover, they have been partitioned time and again by their overlords, so that until rather recently, there was not a strong sense of nationalism or patriotism which bound all Ukrainians together.

The common denominator in these times of external domination was that Ukraine's rich mineral deposits and legendary agricultural output were commandeered for the enrichment of the governing empire. None of these empires, including the Soviet Union, worked to develop the potential of the country. In fact, Stalin purposefully starved nearly four million Ukrainians to death in 1932 and 1933 in order to steal their food supply for Russian population centers. (This is one of many reasons why the Ukrainians have a strong distrust of Russia.)

Out of necessity, therefore, the Ukrainians became astute at fending well enough to get by with whatever meager resources their overlords chose to leave them. That's where their improvisational spirit took root. Whereas Russians, by and large, look for authoritarian decision-making, the Ukrainians have a natural inclination toward on-the-spot innovation. And because there was no centralized planning behind this improvisation, the Ukrainians have a deep-rooted tradition of taking initiative on their own.

This has allowed Ukraine to actualize a totally different style of leadership from what they had known in the Soviet era. Twice since gaining independence, the Ukrainians have taken to the streets and toppled a government which was tending heavily toward authoritarian rule. Even though Ukraine still has struggles with how to implement democracy – after all, it took several decades for us to mature our own application of democracy – they are widely, almost universally, committed to it as an ideal.

The top generals in today's Ukrainian army were trained in Russian military doctrine and Russian styles of leadership. But in its embrace of Western ideals, Ukraine revamped its military along the decision-making lines of how armed forces in the U.S. and Western Europe are structured. They gave decision-making authority to field commanders on the scene, then trained these frontline officers in how to exercise this authority wisely.

Delegated authority thus allows for the kind of quick, nimble military operations which have characterized the Ukrainian approach over the past six months. And because they were once trained in Russian military doctrine, they can readily anticipate how Russian generals will respond to various developments in the course of a conflict and plan accordingly. Moreover, with this firsthand understanding of Russian military doctrine, they recognize the vulnerabilities in that doctrine and exploit those weaknesses in operations against Russian forces.

Our take-away in all of this is that culture shapes leadership styles, and history shapes culture. A family-run business has a different history and therefore a different culture from other types of businesses. They therefore have a distinctively different style of leadership. Conversely, businesses whose history runs along an altogether different course of development will gravitate toward a leadership style which reflects that history and culture. The leadership style may thus be quite unlike the leadership style in the family-run business.

I find that many companies who operate in the international arena fail to fully understand that styles of leadership which are accepted and workable in the U.S., may not be at all workable in other countries. I know that when I opened my offices in East Africa, I had never been required to factor tribal backgrounds into my leadership approaches. But I quickly learned that tribal

loyalties are still so strong – especially in places like Kenya with some three-dozen tribes – that tribal considerations had to be uppermost in setting strategies, building alliances, or even managing employees.

For example, if I needed a decision by a certain government official, it was wise to first determine his or her tribe. That tribal connection could dictate which employees went with me to meet that person. If I made the mistake of showing up with someone from a tribe which the official's tribe held in low regard, I was unlikely to get the decision I wanted, no matter how compelling my case for it.

In summary, in choosing a leadership style, realize that history and culture put boundaries around your range of possible choices when you settle on a leadership style. Just because a style has served you well or has been well-received and highly successful elsewhere is no assurance that it will be acceptable in this context.

Further, your organization's leadership and decision-making style may determine whether it should even engage in certain ventures. Russia's leadership style ill-equipped them for a successful invasion of Ukraine. That's why they were stymied from the start, then steadily pushed back. One of the major reasons that mergers underperform is that new owners impose a leadership style which is not compatible with the history and culture of the acquired entity.

Cultures are not interchangeable because histories are not interchangeable. As a consequence, leadership styles are not interchangeable, either. In choosing a leadership style, as in many other things in life, context matters. And history and culture determine that context.

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