

# The World's Most Unheralded Leaders

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

## Episode UYL2301]

Podcast Date: March 2, 2023



Those of you who follow this podcast regularly know that it has been in suspension for several weeks. That was never my plan. But things worked out that way. Last fall my schedule got so tight that I decided to forego one or two episodes of *Upsize Your Leadership* to have time to catch up on some pressing obligations.

But just as I was ready to resume, I developed an upper respiratory condition which turned into an aggressive case of bronchitis. Even after it went away, I was left with a vicious cough that kicked in whenever I spoke for more than just a few minutes.

Long story short, the cough persisted for more than two months. During that time, trying to record the podcast was an exercise in futility because of the persistent coughing. But that's all behind me now. So, I'm ready to jump back into these visits with you.

And I'm using this first program back in production to announce a major change for the podcast. For the past five years I have housed in in a directory on my company's website, LeaderPerfect.com. But now it has its own website, UpsizeYourLeadership.com. All the previous episodes and scripts are now housed at that domain. And that's where you'll find the program in the future. Of course, you can always listen to it on C-Suite Network, on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Play, iHeart Radio, Stitcher, TuneIn and elsewhere. But scripts and other downloads are found only at UpsizeYourLeadership.com.

In any event, I'm just glad to be back. And as I was thinking about how best to relaunch, I kept thinking about a leadership lesson which I learned from a good friend who passed away a few weeks ago. So, today I want to tell you about him and that valuable leadership lesson which he taught me. When you respect the wisdom in his lesson, you're sure to Upsize Your Leadership.

---

When we moved back to Dallas from the West Coast in 1986, I quickly formed a friendship with Linus Wright. His name may not mean much to most people who were not around Dallas or Houston in those days. But he was an educational and community leader par excellence.

When I met him, he was superintendent of schools in Dallas, a post he held for ten years, after his previous tenure as the chief financial officer and later the deputy superintendent of the Houston school system. Two years after we met, he accepted an appointment from President

---

Reagan to be Undersecretary of Education under then Secretary of Education, Bill Bennett. Linus knew American education from top to bottom.

Linus later served as Treasurer of my campaign when I ran for Congress. We were neighbors, spiritual compatriots, and good friends. My last conversation with him two years ago took place in a checkout line at a Home Depot, where we were both buying items for repairs on our homes. He was well into his 90s by then, as active as ever and still with one of the most powerful handshakes I've ever felt.

As I mentioned before, Linus passed away last year. When word reached me of his death, I immediately thought of something that was never mentioned in articles about him in the press or his obituary or his memorial service. But it was an achievement which was so unique that I always told him that he needed to enshrine it in the Guinness Book of Records. No one will ever replicate his feat. Let me tell you about it.

In 1941, he was wrapping up his degree at Austin College in Sherman, Texas. His graduation was in December, shortly after Pearl Harbor. From the graduation ceremony, he walked to the train station and headed to Fort Polk, Louisiana to begin basic training. After basic, he went into paratroop training, was then shipped by boat to Europe, where he jumped several times in combat. When the war was over, he returned to Austin College and completed a masters degree, just in time to be called back to active duty for the Korean War.

When his service in Korea was finished, he returned home with considerable credit remaining in his G.I. Bill benefits. But since he already had a graduate degree and his goal was to teach school, there was no need to use his benefits to pursue formal education. Instead, he used the benefits to earn a private pilot's license. And that's when the amazing feat took place.

He had spent all of those years as a paratrooper jumping out of planes. But he had never landed in one – not until he was wrapping up that first flying lesson. Fourteen years between his first takeoff and his first landing. As I said, no one will ever match that record.

But that's not why I'm focusing on Linus in this podcast. No, the incident I want to highlight is a conversation I had with him right after Bill Bennet tendered his resignation as Secretary of Education. Linus and his delightful wife Joyce were back in Dallas for a brief visit and speculation was rife that he was about to be appointed to Bill's post. So, I asked him whether he planned to go to the White House and make a pitch for Bill's old job. I fully expected him to say, "Yes."

To my surprise, he responded with an emphatic "No." Then he added a comment which became that pivotal leadership lesson which I alluded to earlier. "Some of us," he said, "make our greatest contribution as the number two leader in an organization. That's where we find the most fulfillment. As many great things as we achieved in the Dallas Independent School District while I was there, I actually had greater joy in my years as the number two guy in Houston."

In that statement, he forced me to confront a reality that I had never considered before. But I should have. I was married to a woman who, in that regard, was like Linus. From the earliest days of our relationship, I was struck with Fran's intelligence, her speaking ability, and her innate ability to make positive and lasting impressions on people. If she has an enemy in the world, I couldn't tell you who it might be. She is the consummate "people person" and a natural leader.

When I ran for Congress in 2002, I was campaigning in a sprawling district which laced its way through 13 counties. Many times I had requests to speak at the very same hour at events five counties apart. She was always ready to take one of those commitments and fill in for me. Later, when I would encounter people who heard her, they would say, “No reflection on you, fella, but why isn’t SHE running for Congress.” As I said, a natural leader.

Recognizing that, I began urging her early in our marriage to take various upfront leadership roles. But inevitably she pushed back. She would say, “I don’t enjoy the spotlight. What I enjoy is making the person in the spotlight look as good as possible.”

I always complied with her wishes and never promoted the opportunity to her again. But I never fully understood her line of thinking. From high school, through college, and over my entire adult career I had always held the top post in almost every organization I was part of. Either that, or I was being groomed to take the top position. Aspiring to be number two was never on my radar.

Therefore, when Fran would defend her desire to be number two, a voice inside me whispered to itself, “That’s really strange.” And then years later, here I was in a conversation with one of the most accomplished men I had ever met, and he was saying the very same thing.

To be sure, I had always appreciated the number two people in the organizations which I led. I fully recognized that their contributions were often critical to many successes which I got credit for, but which owed more to their work than to mine. But I had always seen these co-workers as apprentices, more or less, dutifully preparing themselves to take my post when I was moved on. It never dawned on me that they indeed might see their end purpose as being the number two – helping number one maximize his or her success, and finding complete fulfillment in doing so, with no ambition to go any higher.

That conversation with Linus changed my entire outlook on how I should react to that perspective which I had always considered somewhat strange in my wife. Maybe the most unrecognized and unappreciated leaders in the world are those men and women who excel at being number two.

Which brings me back to another humorous story about Linus. Actually about his wife Joyce. She was a delightful spirit with an irrepressible smile that seemed forever etched on her face. One of the things which she enjoyed about Washington was its social life, because she so thoroughly enjoyed meeting people.

But one of the downsides of being an Undersecretary in Washington is that you are not automatically on the invitation list for some of the biggest events. Only the Cabinet Secretaries and their spouses are asked to attend. As a result, Joyce regularly found herself unable to go to some gala or some spectacular Washington event which she would have loved to attend.

Her solution? She got with the mates of all of the Undersecretaries in Reagan’s Administration, and they formed what she called “The Second Bananas Club.” Everyone in the club was married to a person who was the second banana in one Federal department or another. Whenever there was a big dinner restricted only to Secretary level officials and their spouses, the Second Bananas Club would put on their own event. They would stage their own dinner.

She effectively made being a second-banana leader something to celebrate. Now, I look back and realize that this is the only time that I can recall the existence of an organization whose purpose was to honor and celebrate second-tier leadership. That’s why the title of this episode

---

refers to people like this as the most unrecognized leaders in the world. Having taught leadership on four continents, I'm yet to find a place which truly celebrates the contribution of second-tier leaders.

And that's the term which I prefer for people like Linus and Fran. The term "second banana" was a great word choice for what Joyce sought to accomplish in Washington. But the phrase sounds a bit frivolous. It really doesn't do justice to the exceptional leadership of people like Linus and Fran.

Moreover, referring to them as "number two" leaders can seem dismissive of their contribution. After all, haven't we been in organizations where the number two person's sole duty was to stand in the wings as the go-to party should the number one person be snatched out of the picture? In other words, the phrase "number two" can be construed to mean that the person in that position is a mere placeholder.

But true second-tier leaders are not placeholders. They are vital and indispensable. Consequently, my term of preference for the Linuses and Frans of the world is second-tier leaders. Their leadership needs to be recognized, honored, and applauded. In fact, I'm rather sure there's a book on second-tier leadership just waiting to be written. Maybe an anthology of interviews with people who have excelled in that position.

I would be remiss, however, if I closed without this word of advice. As you've listened to this podcast, perhaps you recognized some of Linus and Fran in you. You really do enjoy making the person in the spotlight look good. You just don't want the spotlight for yourself.

If that's you, you've probably felt pressure from others – much as Fran once felt pressure from me – to set your sights higher. The world is pretty effective at making second-tier leaders feel as though they've fallen short of their potential. But position on the totem pole is no measure of potential. You will always be most effective doing things which fulfill you. And while you may well have the potential for the spotlight position, you won't make your best contribution in that role if you don't find it fulfilling. Your energy, imagination, and creativity will always be optimal when you're in the right place.

So, my parting counsel is, always remember that there's nothing second class about second-tier leadership.

---

*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](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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

Scripts for all episodes can be downloaded at <https://www.UpsizeYourLeadreship.com/episodes>.

**Notice:** You are free to duplicate or redistribute this script so long as the authorship and copyright information are retained. This material is not in the public domain and is the intellectual property of the host.