

Two Mentors, Priceless Counsel

What My Two Most Important Mentors Taught Me

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode UYL2316

Podcast Date: July 19, 2023[Date]



When I keynote or train on leadership success, I often talk about the importance of having great mentors. People will often ask me if I have had mentors myself. Of course, I always say, “Yes.” And time permitting, I will tell them about some of these mentoring relationships.

And when I share these stories, there are two which frequently work their way into my remarks. Today, I want to share these two stories with you. I’m going to discuss two invaluable life lessons which I learned from men now long dead, but whose advice to me is just as relevant to you and is timeless in its wisdom. For those who are leaders particularly, what these

men taught me is sure to upsize your leadership.

There is a short proverb which has been repeated for generations. “Know thyself.” In other words, know who you are, first and foremost. Until we genuinely know who we are ourselves, we are not fully equipped to help others or to achieve our full potential.

When I was in my twenties, a man who was old enough to have been my dad took me under wing. For the next 30 years he would be one of my most important mentors. He never identified himself as such. He simply came alongside me and offered me constant counsel based on the amazing insight which he had developed over decades of serving others.

He had his own take on that proverb, “Know thyself.” This is how he stated it: “We all have a flat side on our wheel someplace,” he would say. “The sooner we identify that flat side and build people and systems around us to compensate for it, the sooner we will be successful and the more successful we will be.”

I’m not exaggerating when I say that I probably heard him say those words a hundred times over the years of our association. He clearly thought that they were words to live by. And the fact is, he did live by them.

One of his greatest loves was his church. When I met him, he had been one of its most noted leaders for more than 25 years. And to say that he was a noted leader in that church is no small compliment, for it was a church filled with exceptional leaders.

But one day, in almost an off-handed comment, he said to me, “I’m going to step down from my leadership role in the church.” To say the least, I was taken aback. If anything, he was at the peak of his effectiveness. “Why would you do that?” I asked. “Because it’s time,” he said. Then, he went on to explain.

“We have a lot of gifted young people in this church, and they are brimming with ideas which spark their enthusiasm. But I’ve been at this a long time. I’ve heard lots of great ideas. And the truth is, most of the ones we tried did not work out all that well. As a result, I’ve developed something of a skeptical streak. When these young people come to me now with their ideas, the first thought that goes through my mind is, ‘That won’t work. We tried something like that years ago, and it fell on its face.’”

He continued by saying, “These young people deserve a leader who will encourage their dedication and imagination. I can’t do that if I’m throwing a wet blanket on their ideas. It’s therefore time for me to step aside.” And he proceeded to do so. He didn’t walk away from the church, however. He became one of its most stellar volunteers. He pitched in on every turn to make every activity as successful as possible.

But he never stepped back into a leadership position. He knew himself. And he was honest enough about himself and humble enough in his self-assessment that he knew when the time had come to pass the baton. Thus, when he would tell me that we all have a flat side on our wheel someplace, I knew it wasn’t just some folksy proverb he liked to quote. He believed it. And he lived it.

As a result, I took it seriously. He became my role model for honest self-assessment. And when I took his example to heart, when I began seriously looking for my flat side, it made itself evident. The fact was, I was good at coming up with great ideas and rallying people to get behind them. That’s why I held major leadership positions at a relatively young age. The flat side of my wheel, however, was that I was not particularly good at executing on the ideas I developed. I could flesh them out. I could design exceptional plans for implementing them. I just wasn’t all that effective in translating the plans into concrete actions.

The reason was fairly simple. While I was in the midst of implementing one idea, two or three others would come to mind, stoke my excitement, and start laying claim on my interest, my energy, and my time. I tended to leave a great many good plans half-finished.

Once I came to grips with that, I became more purposeful in choosing my number two person. Whenever I had the opportunity to do so – and I didn’t always have that privilege – I chose a number two person in my organization who loved execution, who loved implementation. People who excelled at putting plans in action as I excelled at generating the initial idea and formulating a plan to go with it.

I also looked for one other quality in these number two people. I looked for someone with a strong enough sense of self and enough courage that he or she – and several of them were “she’s” – would not hesitate to say straight up, “Boss, the wheels are about to come off, because you’re off chasing all of these new ideas and not keeping your eye on the implementation of the plan that we need to be executing.” They would call me to account. They would keep me focused.

Looking back over my life, I’ve received credit for many an endeavor that I just happened to hold the top office for. However, the success we achieved depended far more on these number two

people than on my creativity or imagination or ability to rally the troops. They were the ones who drove the project through to completion by driving me to complete it.

Today, as an executive leadership coach I routinely encourage my clients to identify the flat side of their wheel. Once they've done so, we then move to the second part of my mentor's advice. Remember, he said that the sooner that we build people and systems around us to compensate for our flat side, the sooner we will be successful and the more successful we will be. I've described how I learned to surround myself with people who compensated for my flat side. What my clients often need is a system which compensates for their flat side. It may be a marketing system. A PR system. A quality control system. A training system. The list goes on and on.

I find this to be especially true with companies which are still run by their founder. As these types of companies grow, they tend to develop the same flat side in their operations as the flat side in the personality of the founder. Simply as a result of timing, luck, ingenuity, hard work, opportunism, or whatever, the company grows, thrives, and attains a commendable level of success.

By now, however, it is large enough and complex enough that one or two key employees cannot compensate for the founder's flat side and now the flat side of the organization. It calls for the time and financial investment to create a system.

Thus, both individuals and organizations have a flat side to their wheel. Have you identified yours? How are you compensating for it? What more needs to be done? How much potential are you leaving unfulfilled because the flat side off your wheel can't capitalize on it?

In case you haven't surmised it, the man I just described was the most important mentor in my life. But another mentor made a near equal contribution to my success. I met him slightly earlier in my life, while I was in college. He was one of my professors. To be honest, my favorite professor. I took every course which he offered, even when I did not need it for my degree plan.

Later, when I began graduate study, the university gave me a fellowship to teach two courses each semester. My office was just down the hall from my favorite professor's office. His door was usually open. And because I had to pass by it both en route to my office and in leaving the building, he would frequently invite me to step in and visit.

Very quickly, he took it upon himself to be my mentor. He knew that I was maneuvering toward doing doctoral studies at a highly competitive university, and he wanted to be certain that I positioned myself as advantageously as possible.

Now, before I continue, I must tell you about one of his characteristic lines in his undergraduate lectures. He was constantly mentioning pivotal books which he thought we should read. He didn't require them. He simply stressed that anyone who was to be considered well-informed in our field should be familiar with these books. Dozens of books still on my library shelves came from his recommendation.

Periodically, when he was giving us a bibliography of things to read, he would offer this maxim: "Read wisely, widely, and well." And occasionally he would elaborate on those three words.

Read wisely. Don't waste precious time reading things which are not going to further your growth and development.

Read widely. Don't stay in the narrow lane of your own pursuits or academic discipline. Read far afield from your specializations. The cross-fertilization of ideas from far-flung fields of study will give you insight and innovative ideas that you can discover in no other way.

And finally, read well. Read authors who are stylistic giants in the way that they use language. The first step in learning how to write well yourself is to begin by reading the best.

Read wisely. Read widely. Read well. With that background, let's return to my just-passing-by conversations with him in his office. In our second or third visit, I set my briefcase down on the edge of his desk. As we talked, he opened it and started retrieving the books inside. He wanted to know why I was reading each one. He set aside one which was required reading for a course that I was taking. Another, I told him, was necessary research for my thesis. He set it aside. But there were two others that I was reading simply from my interest in them.

He picked up one of them, thumbed through it, and said, "From the bookmark, it appears you've read about 50 pages so far. Have you read anything yet that jarred your thinking on things that you've always believed?" I shook my head, "no." He responded, "Is there anything so far that has forced you to rethink basic assumptions you've made about people, about life, about the world around us?" Again, I said, "No." Then he continued. "Have you come across any ideas which were so challenging that you had to re-read a paragraph two or three times to be sure you understood it?" Again, I answered in the negative.

The moment the word "no" came from my mouth, he slammed the book shut, turned, and tossed it on the bookshelf behind him. "What are you doing with my book?" I asked. "I'm taking it back to the library and checking it in for you," he said. "But I'm enjoying the book," I insisted.

"Look," he said, "there are over a million books in that library. You can't read all of them, even if you could read one book a day for the rest of your life. And you've just told me that you've wasted a major portion of your week reading a book which is doing nothing to stretch you and help you grow. I'm not going to let that continue."

And with that, he picked up the other book and began the inquisition again. In about two minutes, it was on the shelf behind him, as well. "From now on," he said, "consult with me every time you're thinking of reading a given book. I want to pass on it before you waste time on it."

To say that I left upset is an understatement. But he was chairman of my thesis committee, so I could not just ignore him. So, for a few weeks I dutifully took books by for him to approve. But eventually, I decided to by-pass his screening process by taking books directly to my apartment and never mentioning them to him.

One day, as I was passing his office, he looked up over his horn-rimmed reading glasses and said, "Mr. Armour, please come in here for a moment." As I complied, he said, "You've been checking books out of the library without getting my approval." I was dumbfounded. How did he know? When I asked, he said, "I went to the library and checked your record. Now here are the books which you've checked out without my signoff. Sit down and let's talk about them."

A few months later, I left the campus and moved across the country. I never saw him again. But I will be eternally grateful for what he did for me. He ingrained in me the mantra: Read wisely, read widely, read well. It's some of the most valuable advice I've ever received.

As a trainer, it has empowered me to draw illustrations and examples from highly diverse realms of human endeavor. As a coach, it has helped me relate to executives and entrepreneurs in fields for which I have no formal preparation. Yet, I've read enough in that arena that I can speak intelligently about it. And in simple day-to-day life, when problems or issues arise, I can draw on concepts and ideas from far-flung facets of human knowledge.

And as an author, now with a dozen books and hundreds of newsletters and blogs under my belt, there's not a day that I do not profit from his encouragement to read the best authors, to soak up their way with words, and to profit from their stylistic genius.

I therefore leave you today with that urging. Read wisely. Read widely. Read well. Of course, if my professor were around today, he would no doubt have updated his counsel. He would talk about listening to podcasts and ebooks using the same criteria. Choose wisely. Listen widely. Pay attention to how the masters of the craft do their magic.

Yet, no matter how wisely, widely, and well we read or listen, there will still be a flat side on our wheel somewhere. Reading widely or its audio equivalent will always engender success. But it can never fully replicate the advantage we give ourselves when we build relationships and systems around us to compensate for the flat side of our wheel.

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.

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.UpsizeYourLeadership/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.