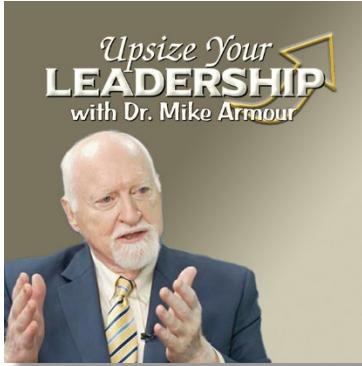


Leadership: The Two Anchor Points

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Traditionally, the beginning of a year is a time for launching new initiatives in business and personal life. That's especially true for me this year. I'm onboarding a half-dozen new associates in my leadership development firm. I'm putting the final pieces together for a one-hour, weekly streaming television program which launches February 1. And I'm pulling together the first of four new online leadership courses scheduled to go live beginning in the spring. Lots of balls in the air.

But the one which is taking the most time at present is the series of online courses that I'm developing. They are planned as one anchor course, then three additional in-depth courses which expand on concepts from the anchor course. I've titled the anchor course, "Excel as a Pacesetter Leader," and the courses will find their home on the internet at pacesetterleaders.com, which will go live in a few weeks.

As part of that course development, I'm writing modules on the basic question, "What does it mean to be a leader?" As I was working on that content, it struck me that these podcasts have not addressed some of the most fundamental concepts of leadership for something like three or four years. Since then, a lot of new followers have joined my audience. So, perhaps it would be helpful to take up some of the most basic issues in leadership as we get the year underway.

That's what I'm doing today. Let me encourage you, therefore, to join me for the next 15 minutes. Even though we will be talking about basic ideas related to leadership, our take on them is sure to upsize your leadership.

Have you ever done internet research on the definition of leadership? It's amazing how many are out there. It seems that every book on leadership (my own included) offer a definition. And there are lots of books on leadership, so there are lots of definitions.

They all have something to commend themselves. Yet, many are better suited to describe leadership on a very sizable scale or at the top of a large organization.

But in day-to-day life, the exercise of leadership is often practiced in small-scale projects or by people on lower rungs of the organizational ladder. A woman heading a pack of Cub Scouts is a leader, just as much as the CEO of an international conglomerate.

It seems to me, therefore, that we need a definition of leadership which befits the role of leaders wherever they are found. That's why, nearly 20 years ago, I developed the following definition: Leadership is the art of rallying people around a shared purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it.

I'm yet to find any leadership role or leadership context where that definition does not describe the essence of leading. Seven key concepts go into the definition: art, rallying, people, shared purpose, motivation, mobilization, and achievement. Of those seven, however, two are most critical. And I want to focus on those two today. The two are "people" and "purpose." I refer to them as the anchor points for great leadership. Again, leadership is the art of rallying *people* around a shared *purpose*, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it.

Unlike management, which is often about optimizing the use of tools and material resources, leadership is always about optimizing the contributions of people. I illustrate this in leadership trainings by pointing out that we speak of managing people and leading people. We also speak of managing budgets and managing inventories. But we would never speak of *leading* a budget or *leading* an inventory. We only lead people.

A good leader is therefore a people-person. Not because it's politically expedient. Not because it's expected. But because great leaders are genuinely interested in knowing their people. Their team's well-being is an enduring concern for them. And they strive to bring out the best in each person.

Most of all, great leaders know that they cannot do what needs to be accomplished by themselves. They need the talents, insights, and commitment of others. They are therefore quick to give credit where credit is due. They are quick to show appreciation. And they are quick to recognize sacrificial commitment with appropriate recognition.

Some leaders do so, to be sure, for purely pragmatic reasons. Realizing that they need what their people contribute, they build connections merely for the sake of expediency. And they pursue this connection at a somewhat superficial level. They never develop a genuine understanding of people in general or their own people in particular. Instead, they settle for the minimal effort required to keep people willing to participate.

Leaders like this typically turn out to be mediocre, at best. They never rise to the level of effectiveness which sets great leaders apart. For great leaders, the motivation to connect with their people goes far beyond expediency.

Beyond that, great leaders are persistent students of people. They want to understand what accounts for differences in personality. They want to know what their people value most highly. They want to learn the best way to motivate their team members collectively and individually. They want to be able to communicate with their people more precisely, more inspirationally, and with greater clarity.

Not only is leadership always people-centric, it is also future-oriented. It basically consists of taking a group of people from where they are today to where they need to be tomorrow.

“Where they need to be” has both a group component and an individual component. Leaders take their people as a whole to a given destination. But in doing so, they also develop their people individually along the way. They use the journey to help each member of the group grow to be more competent, more confident, more accomplished, or more mature.

Because they view themselves as leading people on a journey, great leaders put a premium on opportunities to communicate with those on the journey with them. As communicators, they constantly remind their people of the greater outcome which the leader and the leader’s team are working to achieve. Great leaders are not only goal-oriented themselves. They recognize that people perform best when vital goals are kept at the forefront of their attention.

Which brings us to the second critical term in our definition of leadership: “purpose.” Leadership is the art of rallying people around a shared purpose.

All leadership centers on the pursuit and accomplishment of some purpose. This purpose provides the “why” for undertaking the endeavor in the first place.

This “why” is vitally important for today’s workers and volunteers. Compared to their counterparts in an earlier era, they want more voice in what impacts their work experience. Not only that, they also want to devote their energy to things which they view as meaningful and significant. They want a compelling “why” behind what they are asked to do.

Leaders provide this sense of “why” by unifying their followers around a shared purpose. In essence, the purpose is the rationale for the sacrifices which the leader will ask of people in order for the endeavor to succeed. A well-defined purpose points to an appealing future, one filled with promise for those who pursue it. The leader must embrace this purpose personally and wholeheartedly, then bring others to embrace it, as well.

Until the leader’s people fully embrace this orchestrating purpose, it is not genuinely a “shared purpose.” And if the people do not share the purpose, its power to motivate them is sorely limited.

As a result, leaders cannot impose a purpose on an organization. They cannot force it upon their people. Otherwise, it’s not genuinely shared. Neither is it shared if people merely give passive assent to it. If it is to be a shared purpose, people must hold to it firmly and willingly. They must act as though they own it. Only then will they accept personal accountability for their role in achieving it.

Thus, it is the leader’s responsibility to spell out this purpose clearly, repeatedly, and persuasively, so that people get fully behind it. This is why great leaders inherently recognize the need to be effective communicators. Their role is not simply to inform their people of the purpose, but to enlist ardent support for it.

The shared purpose itself may come in all sorts of sizes. For leaders of small teams or subordinate elements within an organization, the purpose may be something as simple as an objective to be achieved, a milestone to be accomplished, a goal to be attained, a process to be completed, or a task to be performed. For those with higher or broader leadership duties, the purpose is more likely to be a mission, a vision, or even a cause.

In effect, a leader’s purpose is the primary desired outcome for which the leader is responsible at any given moment. Moreover, within large or complex organizations, where there are tiers of

leadership, leaders at every level have a unique purpose, subordinate to the greater purpose of the overall organization. In general, the higher the level of leadership, the more encompassing the purpose which it serves.

This means that leaders at lower levels of management devote their energy to purposes which are more operational than strategic, more concrete than conceptual. Yet these purposes must fully accord with the purpose which is served by leadership at still higher levels. Otherwise, the organization becomes functionally unaligned. People in unaligned organizations literally work at cross-purposes to one another.

When organizations become unaligned, the first order of business should not be realigning the management structure, but realigning the purposes at every level of the management ladder. Purpose, properly utilized, both unites people and helps maintain united direction.

As a leader, therefore, you have no greater priority this year than staying committed to your people and riveted to your purpose. Remember, they are the anchor points of your leadership success.

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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