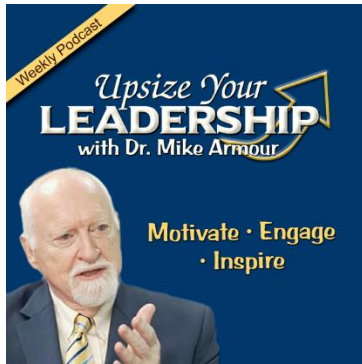


# Exemplify Exceptional Character: Leadership's First Essential

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When we talk about character and leadership, we don't normally think of companies as having character. But they do. They are like humans in that regard.

As with humans, corporate character reveals itself in the values that shape its tough decisions, how it responds to crisis or disruption, the way that it treats people, and its willingness to accept accountability.

The character of a company never exceeds the collective character of its leaders. After all, they are the ones who make the most consequential decisions, the ones that reveal the company's true values, outlooks, and core principles.

Today's program takes up the nature of personal and corporate character in this second installment of our series about five essentials of leadership. I introduced these essentials in last week's episode, and for the next few weeks, I'll be examining each of the five individually and in detail.

In addition, this episode introduces a new construct, what I call the Congruence Accelerator™. Think of it as the catalyst that brings out the full potential for an organization to excel at agility, speed, and innovation. I refer to these three as the kingmakers in today's hypercompetitive business climate. And the Congruence Accelerator™ enhances the potential of all three of them.

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For those who have not heard the first program in this series, let me offer a brief recap of what it covered. I used it to introduce a schema that I called the Five Essentials of Leadership. They are:

- Exemplify exceptional character
- Cultivate high trust
- Maximize alignment around values, vision, and strategies
- Engage people in ways that motivate and inspire them
- Create a results-oriented culture that demands excellence of itself

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As I pointed out in that introductory episode, the sequence in this list is not randomly chosen. It's purposeful and intentional. I've arranged these five essentials in a causal order. Each essential builds on those which precede it in the list.

Character appears first, because it's the foundation that underpins the other four. Character is a primary determinant of whether people will trust a leader. The depth of that trust will bear directly on a leader's ability to effect organizational alignment around values, vision, and strategies. Without that alignment, engagement can never be optimized. And a results-oriented culture is only possible where alignment and engagement are strong.

We will return to this causal sequence time and again in this series as we explore these leadership essentials individually. We begin today by examining character. Since it is foundational, we need a clear, precise understanding of what character entails.

Unfortunately, many people have a muddled concept of character. When asked to define it, they generally equate character with integrity. We do the same thing in day-to-day speech. If I say that someone lacks character, people will assume that I'm questioning the person's integrity.

But while integrity figures large in character, integrity is only one of several virtues that contribute to it. Other virtues like honesty, dependability, responsibility, and truthfulness are no less essential to character.

In addition, character encompasses how we handle adversity, setbacks, or crisis; how we deal with conflict and confrontation; how we treat people differently from one setting to another. For instance, if I don't have the resilience to rebound from disappointing setbacks, people will attribute it to weakness in my character.

Yet, the things that we've mentioned thus far represent only one side of character. They point to its content. They tell us nothing about the structure of character itself. What is the structure that is common to every aspect of character?

We can describe that common denominator with one word: congruence. **The essence of character is congruence, the full alignment of values, words, and actions.** Three elements. **What you value. What you say. What you do.**

When these three line up – when what we say truly reflects what we value, and when what we do is fully consistent with what we say –our character is well-integrated. When they diverge, character gaps appear.

Now please note that when we look at character through the lens of congruence, we are not making judgments about the quality of character. That is, we are not asking whether character has aligned itself around the *right* values. That's a separate, important conversation.

Rather, congruence asks whether our values, our words, and our actions *align* with each other. Do our actions contradict our words? Do our words contradict our values? To the degree that they do, we have gaps in our character.

This is another way of saying that our character should have structural integrity. I'm using that term exactly the same way that engineers do. They use it in reference to bridges, buildings, and

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other structures whose framework must bear up under stress. Structural integrity means that all components work together as a unit to impart strength to the overall design.

With character, structural integrity means that values, words, and actions work as one. There is consistency between the values that shape us, what we profess about these values, and how we act in situations that test our commitment to them. Our values, words, and actions are congruent.

Thus, integrity takes on two different dimensions in character. As a virtue, it's an indispensable contributor to character. Yet, it's only one of many virtues that make a contribution. On the other hand, structural integrity plays a role in every aspect of character. It's what makes character congruent.

Now, what we call lapses in character are actually gaps between values, words, and actions. The gap between values and words is insincerity – claiming to value something that we don't genuinely esteem. It's the easiest gap to spot and the most damaging to trust.

The gap between words and actions is inconsistency – saying that we will do something, but then not following through. It's the most common gap and the most corrosive to credibility. And as we shall see when we examine a culture of trust in the next episode, trust pivots on credibility.

Since both insincerity and inconsistency impede trust, you can see why exceptional character is a necessary precedent to deep trust. Character is foundational. Incongruence in character – whether in the form of insincerity or inconsistency – erodes the trust that others have in us.

People notice the gaps, even when we think that we are clever in hiding them. Those who notice may not give the incongruence a name, but they adjust to it, nonetheless. They are guarded around us. They are cautious about believing what we say. They are hesitant to take our commitments at face value.

Can you see how this reticence impairs our effectiveness as leaders? People who don't have faith in their leaders don't put their best effort into the success of the organization. That's why one extensive study at Harvard concluded that strength of character is the primary determinant of a leader's success.

Given the crucial role of character, let's shift our discussion of it to a higher gear. Historically, we have thought of character only as a personal attribute. But seen as congruence between our values, words, and actions, character is no longer solely personal. It can also be an attribute of groups and organizations.

As a result, alignment between values, words, and actions can exist at three nested levels. The first is the level of the individual leader. Do our values, words, and actions align? Do they have structural integrity? This is character in the personal sense. It's the mirror that we look into to judge your own congruence.

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The second level is the leadership collective, that is, the leadership team as a whole. Do their values, words, and actions align? Do team members share a common commitment to critical values? Is there consistency in how the team communicates values and puts them into action?

The third level of congruence is the organization. Do values that govern its decision-making align with its stated values? And what about its policies and the way that it conducts daily operations? Are these consistent with its espoused values and what it advocates regarding them?

Questions of this nature probe an organization's culture. Corporate culture gives visible expression to the organization's character. An organization's character, in turn, arises from the collective character of its leadership, which itself is a blend of character traits of individual leaders.

Another way to view this is to see character as fractal. A fractal is a pattern that repeats at every scale.

By way of illustration, think of the command structure in the military. Command organizes itself in the same hierarchical fashion whether you're talking about a squad, a platoon, a company, a regiment, a brigade, a division, or an entire army. And every military force in the world relies on this very command structure. The structure is a fractal. It's there no matter what the size of the military unit that you're considering.

Character is a fractal in much the same manner. It's one property – the alignment of values, words, and actions – repeating at the level of the individual, the individual's team, and the entire organization. Same essence. Three scales.

I'm *not* saying the organization is a person, or has feelings, or a soul. I'm saying something more defensible and more profound: the *structure* of character – values aligned with words aligned with actions – is identical at all three scales. The thing being verified – that is, congruence – is the same. Only the scale changes.

The scaling begins with you as an individual leader. Your character – your personal congruence – is the seed. To be true to our fractal analogy, your character must be a microcosm of what you want the entire organization to aspire to.

This means that your character must evidence the kind of trust, alignment, motivated engagement, and commitment to excellence that you ultimately want embedded across the entire organization. To use an oft-repeated adage, your duty is to model the way.

That accounts for how I've worded the first essential for leadership. I've stated it as "Exemplify exceptional character." Exemplify. Be a living example of the values, focus, and conduct that you want to percolate through the organization, top to bottom.

In addition, being true to the nature of a fractal, you must use your influence to encourage congruence of character across the entire leadership team. It, too, must embody the values, trust, alignment, engagement, and commitment to excellence that would properly generalize to the organization as a whole.

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However, let me add a qualifying word about congruence. Congruence is not sameness. This is where congruence in our current context differs from the type of congruence that we learned about in geometry classes. There, the sides of congruent triangles maintained the same proportionate length, whatever the size of the triangle.

To force that kind of congruency on a leadership team would be foolhardy, even if it were possible. Leadership teams need to capitalize on the unique capabilities, drives, and personality styles of every team member. We need congruence without sacrificing individuality.

Thus, congruence of character on a leadership team means that the team's values, what it articulates about those values, and its actions that relate to those values align with each other and mutually reinforce one another.

Moreover, character congruence in a team does not mean that everyone shares exactly the same values. It means that they are of one accord on the pivotal values and vision that should shape the organization's culture, branding, marketing, public persona, and relationships with vendors and customers. Individual members of the team may differ markedly in values that have no direct bearing on the organization's vision and mission.

When your personal character is congruent, people can trust you as a leader. When the leadership team's character is congruent, people can trust leadership as a whole, not just individual leaders here and there.

As this series continues, we are going to see that the priority of congruence extends to each of the five essentials of leadership. Trust evidences itself in congruent relationships. Alignment around values, vision, and strategies yields congruent priorities and direction. Engagement results in actions that are congruent with thorough commitment to the organization. A results-oriented culture produces outputs that are congruent with corporate vision, mission, principles, and priorities.

Congruence reigns at every juncture. And wherever it prevails, it accelerates the pace of agility, speed, and innovation.

I've been writing and speaking about these three for over 20 years, from the time that I wrote my best-selling book, *Leadership and the Power of Trust*. Its subtitle was *How to Build a High-Trust, Peak Performance Organization*.

The book focused on performance benefits in terms of speed and rapid adaptability that are only possible in a high-trust environment. I will have more to say about that book in the next episode.

I mention it now only to say that nothing bogs down agility, speed, and innovation more than incongruent corporate character. I've seen it time and again in the more than 80 industries which have drawn on my services.

Reducing incongruence removes countless impediments to agility, speed, and innovation. Or to put it another way, congruence optimizes the pace that an organization is capable of. For that reason, I coined the term Congruence Accelerator™. In upcoming episodes in this series, we will see the benefits of the Congruence Accelerator™ time and again.

Before I close, however, let me offer a concluding comment about character in general. Personality and character should never be confused.

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I offer this caveat because I see so many leaders selected on the basis of their charisma (which is an aspect of personality), not for their character. Politics is rife with figures who win elections because they are so charismatic, only to evidence less than stellar character once in office.

In corporate life, I've noticed a propensity for high-energy extraverts (another personality trait) to receive significant leadership positions without having their character thoroughly vetted. The same thing happens with candidates for promotion who are extremely personable. Their likeability results in people putting faith in them, not because of their character, but because of their winsome personality.

The truth is, personality and character are related. But they are distinctly different aspects of our human makeup. For one thing, we are born with personality, but we must develop character.

I'm fortunate enough to have had three children and now ten grandchildren. Within hours of their birth, we could see signs of personality. Some had a natural inclination to be happy. Others were more high strung. Some were easily upset. Others were more calm.

But the necessary character to make them good citizens would take years to form. And the process would not begin at birth, but only when they were old enough to understand why some things are right and why others are wrong.

Personality, once fully developed, is rather constant for a lifetime. Character, on the other hand, has the potential to be improved throughout life. That's why people who were fairly unprincipled adults in their twenties can become paragons of virtue later on.

Which leads me to a final observation. Our word "character" derives from a Greek word spelled somewhat identically and pronounced much the same. Among the ancient Greeks, however, the word had nothing to do with human attributes.

Instead, it was the name of the die stamp that was used to emboss images on the face of a coin. In that sense, character is stamped on us by upbringing, experience, and social and group pressure. Yet, there's a vast contrast between the image stamped on a coin and the character stamped on us.

That image on a coin would never again be as bright as the day that it was minted. Impurities in its environment and continuous use in transactions would mar the finish. Constant handling would wear the image down and cause it to fade.

Personal character, by contrast, can become more vibrant with every passing year. Personal character is not constrained by what the world has stamped on it. It has the power to choose self-improvement, to rid itself of values that it judges undesirable, to recast itself as it sees beneficial.

The image on a coin had no power to restore its lost radiance. Human character, on the other hand, always has the option of reverting to an aspect of honorable character that it once embodied, but has since forsaken.

And what is true of individual character is no less true of corporate character. It, too, is malleable. Reshaping it is clearly a more daunting task than reforming personal character. And it takes far more time, because so many variables are at play.

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But whether personally, within a team, or across an organization, the process begins with building congruence between values, words, and actions.

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