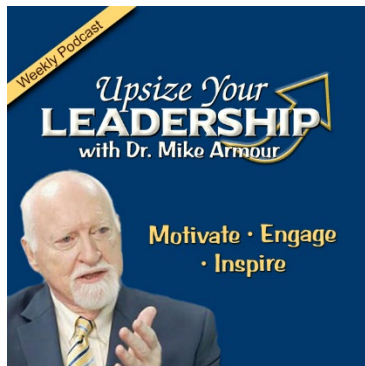


Leadership, Culture, and Excellence

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Let me describe two organizations. You can decide which one is most like yours.

Both have a standard for quality. Admirable standards. In the first, the standard emanates from the leader. When the leader is in the room, people rise to the standard. When the leader walks out — when the deadline is tight, when no one's watching, when it would be so easy to let one thing slide — the standard quietly sags.

The standard is realistic. It can be met, because workers routinely achieve it when the leader is in the room. But insofar

as the organizational culture is concerned, the standard is borrowed. It belongs to one person, and it only operates in proximity to that person.

In the second organization, we see something different. Here the standard no longer dwells in the leader alone. It lives in the *people* — in all of them, in the air between them. They hold each other to it.

Not only that, they hold *themselves* to it personally when they are completely alone. There's no room for mediocrity here. It gets *rejected*, like a body rejecting a splinter, and not because the boss demanded it — because the culture itself will not tolerate it.

This second organization has achieved the rarest and most powerful thing in business: a culture that demands excellence not of its leader, not because of its leader, but of itself.

This is the final episode in a six-part series on the Five Essentials of Leadership. Throughout the series, I've emphasized the fact that these five essentials build on top of one another in the order that we have examined them.

Therefore, if you've not listened to the previous episodes, you should do so. Go to upsizeyourleadership.com/episodes. You will immediately see a date-ordered index of podcast episodes, and the ones in this series are clearly identified. Each one will give you a perspective on leadership that you've probably not considered before.

The final essential in our series is to create a culture that demands excellence of itself. This essential is not merely bolted on to the other four. Properly implemented, the other four, produce a culture that demands excellence of itself.

That word “excellence” is one of the most misappropriated words in our business vocabulary. University studies have found that almost four out of five companies in the U.S. list excellence among their core values.

But if excellence is a core value for most businesses in America, why is there so much mediocrity? Companies by the thousands apparently recognize the importance of excellence, but they do not see it as important enough to operationalize it fully in their culture.

Let me start by recapping the journey that we’ve made together thus far in this series.

We began with **character** — and we defined its essence as **congruence**, the alignment of what you value, what you say, and what you do. This constitutes congruence *within* a person.

Then **trust** — congruence *between* people, a reciprocal relationship in which each party contributes value to the relationship commensurate with the value received from it.

Next, **alignment** — congruence *among* people, so that they all pull in the same direction. So that their individual efforts multiply one another instead of merely adding indiscriminately to what others are doing.

Then **engagement** — congruence between the individual and the enterprise, where leaders help workers find meaning in the work that they do to advance the leader's vision.

And beneath all of it, the idea that ties the series together is the concept of the **Congruence Accelerator™** — congruence, at every scale, is what releases an organization's full capacity to meet the demands of today’s three kingmakers: agility, speed, and innovation.

I have pictured these five essentials as rungs on what I call the “congruence ladder.” Today we reach the top rung.

In the last episode, we saw that engagement energized the organization to move in a set direction. But energy is not the same as *excellence*. You can have a workforce that is inspired, aligned, and pouring itself out – and still settling for outputs that are merely “pretty good.” Enthusiasm is not achievement. Effort is not results. The energy within an engaged workforce needs a standard.

Before we turn to that standard, let me invite you to note something. We began climbing the congruence ladder by addressing congruence within a single person. We called it character. As we continued to climb, we moved to congruence between individuals (trust) to congruence among a team of people (alignment) to congruence between individuals and the enterprise (engagement).

On the fifth rung – a results-oriented culture that demands excellence of itself – we move to congruence between an organization’s stated standards and actual behavior within the organization.

Now, if that sounds strikingly similar to our description of character, there’s good reason. Corporate culture can be thought of as an organization’s character. Both character and culture

espouse certain principles, values, and virtues which are held up as ideals. Proper conduct is then expected to conform to these ideals.

Taken as a whole, these standards may be exalted and praiseworthy, or they may be mediocre and run-of-the-mill. In groups like terrorist organizations, the standards may even be appalling. But all cultures have a set of standards for conduct, both individually and collectively.

We then judge both character and culture by two things. The first is whether or not its standards are congruent with qualities that we consider admirable. And if they are, how congruently behavior measures up to these standards.

In essence, a results-oriented culture that demands excellence of itself is an organization that has elevated its overall character to a level of maturity that we also see in personal character that we consider praiseworthy.

In other words, as we climb the congruence ladder, the first rung is character at the level of the individual. The fifth rung is character at the level of the entire workforce. Congruence between what you value, what you say, and what you do is the uppermost consideration on both rungs. Except on the fifth rung, the word “you” is collective. Here it refers to the entire enterprise. No longer is this congruence of values, words, and behavior resident only in the leader. It now scales to the entire organization.

And, as with mature character in an individual, the desired outcome is for organizational character to become self-regulating. That’s why the aim of the fifth rung is to develop a culture that demands excellence *of itself*.

Many organizations have a standard of excellence. It’s one of the three most commonly mentioned traits when organizations list their core values. Yet, in few instances does the culture of an organization demand excellence of itself. Excellence is a standard imposed by leadership. For the average worker, it’s an externally-generated value, not one that is internally generated and sustained.

While excellence is always a desirable standard, when it is an imposed standard, it tends to languish without constant policing. When the enforcer is not around, commitment to the standard erodes.

Early on, in earlier stages of development, an organization’s only option may be to impose excellence and police it constantly. On the fifth rung, however, leadership seeks to move the commitment to excellence from *outside* the people, where leadership has to police it, to *inside* the people, where they police it themselves – and each other.

Moreover, the fifth rung also calls for internalizing a results orientation within the workforce. It’s possible for workers to take ownership of a standard of excellence, but without also internalizing a results orientation.

Why is it important to internalize a results orientation across the complete workforce? Because the ultimate measure of leadership’s effectiveness is its ability to achieve desired results. No matter how well leaders perform elsewhere, if they do not attain the outcomes that truly count, their leadership is a failure.

Just as excellence is more consistently pursued when it is an internalized value, the quest for results is most successful when the entire organization – not merely leadership – is results oriented. The fifth essential of leadership is thus to create a results-oriented culture.

“Results-oriented” means that the culture measures its performance by *outcomes*. Not by hours logged. Not by good intentions. Not by activity. Not by recognition or publicity received. But by what actually gets accomplished, and how well.

A results-oriented culture is honest with itself about the concrete outcomes that it has achieved. It's a culture that offers no excuse for failure. Rather, its first instinct is to uncover root causes for the failure and correct them.

Now here's the capstone idea that I want you to take away from this episode. A culture cannot demand excellence of itself, nor can it internalize a results orientation out of thin air. It can only do so when the other four leadership essentials are in place – because each one supplies something that's required in order for leadership to succeed on the fifth rung.

The fifth leadership essential requires **character**, because a culture calibrates to what its leader *embodies*, not what the leader *announces*. You cannot demand a standard of workers that you don't exemplify yourself. Congruence has to start within you.

The fifth essential requires **trust**, because peers will only hold peers accountable where it's safe to do so. Without trust, accountability feels like attack and frequently leads to defensive push back. People therefore quit offering feedback. With trust, however, a teammate's tough feedback is received as concern and an act of care.

The fifth essential requires **alignment**, because a culture can only hold itself to a standard that it has *agreed on*. If "excellent" means ten different things to ten people, there's no shared bar to enforce.

And the fifth essential requires **engagement**, because people demand excellence of *themselves* only when they're internally invested — when the work connects to their values. Compliance seldom pursues excellence. Engagement pursues excellence as a matter of course.

Do you see it? The fifth essential is not a technique. **It is what emerges when the first four essentials are all present at once.** Character, trust, alignment, and engagement don't just add up to a results culture — they *produce* one. That is the Congruence Accelerator reaching full power: congruence at every scale, finally compounding into an organization that holds itself to excellence without being told.

With every essential thus far, we've identified two gaps that thwart it. The fifth essential is no different. A results-oriented culture that demands excellence of itself is only possible if two gaps are avoided.

The first is complacency. Here the standard is simply too low, or it's quietly sagging. The culture tolerates "good enough," makes excuses, explains away missed targets. Inherent in complacency is a danger that most leaders miss: a culture *always* enforces a standard on itself; That's what cultures do.

So, when the standard is low, the self-enforcement runs in reverse. The group starts policing people for working *too hard*, caring *too much*, making the others look bad. Mediocrity becomes self-demanding. The bar doesn't just sit low. It actively pulls high performers *down* to it. You don't get to choose whether your culture self-enforces. You only get to choose *what* it enforces.

The second gap is coercion. Here the standard is high. But it's external, driven by fear, imposed from the top by an enforcer. People meet the bar only when watched. The moment the pressure lifts, the standard collapses, or worse, people start *gaming* it, hitting the metric while missing the point. Coerced excellence is brittle excellence. It looks the same as the real thing right up until the leader turns away.

The healthy path runs circumvents high standards imposed from above and lackadaisical standards that the organization defaults to. The healthy path leads to high standards demanded from within.

A self-demanding culture eliminates the last and largest tax in our series. Our previous episodes have identified a hidden tax on every run of the congruence ladder. The tax is levied on productivity and speed.

Properly implemented, the fifth rung eliminates what we might call a supervision tax. The leader no longer has to police quality, chase follow-through, or inspect every result, because the culture inspects itself. Time and energy previously required for leadership policing is freed up. The standard of excellence holds in real time, even at the edges.

Consequently, a results-oriented culture that demands excellence of itself directly contributes to organizational speed. Our earlier episodes have identified speed as one of the three king-makers in today's hypercompetitive business environment.

A second king-maker is innovation. A culture that demands excellence *of itself* finds "good enough" intolerable. It therefore keeps reaching past it. Mediocrity is the enemy of innovation. A culture that demands excellence of itself is the only one that, on its own initiative, hunts for mediocrity. People propose the better way not because they are asked, but because the current way offends their own standard.

The third king-maker is agility. And here's the most remarkable by-product of a genuinely self-demanding culture. A culture that demands excellence of itself doesn't just *hold* to excellence under pressure. It *raises* the standard by which excellence is measured.

Stress, setbacks, a hard quarter – these don't make such a culture lower the bar. They make it find a better way to clear it. To borrow a term from psychology, the culture develops antifragility. The word refers to the ability to go beyond simple resilience in the face of stress, volatility, or adversity and actually grow and become more adept at adaptability.

A borrowed standard cracks when things get hard. An owned standard *grows* when things get hard. That is the highest expression of everything that we've built in this series.

As we move to a conclusion, let me reiterate a suborn truth that I mentioned earlier. Your culture will demand something of itself whether you build a demand on purpose or not. By nature, culture is self-enforcing. The only question – the entire question for leadership – is *what* it enforces.

Build the five essentials, and it will enforce excellence, and raise the bar on itself year after year. Neglect them, and it will enforce mediocrity just as faithfully, dragging your best people down to the comfort of the middle. There is no neutral. There is no culture that simply coasts. It is compounding *up*, or it is compounding *down*. You are choosing the direction every single day, in what you exemplify and what you tolerate.

A high-trust, aligned, results-oriented culture is a *mirror and a discipline*. It demands so much of the organization that it surfaces remnants of incongruence on every rung of the ladder. It serves as a feedback loop to highlight where added leadership attention is needed. This includes incongruence that it reveals in your own character as a leader.

So the culture that you have created doesn't merely flatter your reputation. It actually *forms* your character. It makes you more congruent than you were.

I close with that observation because the format of this series invites a misunderstanding. Because we have taken each of the five essentials in sequence and put each one under a microscope, and because I have emphasized how they each build on those that precede it, I've invited a mistaken conclusion. Someone might think that I'm saying that until you've developed exemplary character, you should focus on that rung of the ladder to the exclusion of the others.

That's not at all what I want to convey. In fact, the metaphor of a ladder breaks down at this point, because you only ascend a ladder one rung at a time. However, the necessary effort to bring congruence to every level of your organization will take time – a lot of it. If you waited to address an essential until those beneath it on the ladder are what they should be, you would never get to the higher rungs.

The fact is, leadership must work all five rungs simultaneously, using what efforts on the fifth rung reveal as a mirror to reflect where the most pressing work remains to be done on the lower rungs. The fifth rung depends on all of the others. Challenges at that level thus underscore work still needing to be done on lower levels.

I would offer this caveat, however. Until trust is robust through your entire organization, never let up in cultivating a high-trust environment. Trust is the glue that holds us together when the going gets rough. And it's the lubricant that makes things run even smoother when times are good. Without trust to anchor our footing, the work on rungs three, four, and five are exceedingly difficult and at times impossible.

As we close this series, let me trace its line of development one more time.

Character makes you predictable, and predictability earns **trust**. Trust gives you the influence to **align** people around a shared direction. Alignment points their efforts in a singular direction, so motion is not wasted in scattergun approaches. **Engagement** then energizes that alignment with people who want to move, because leadership has connected its vision to their values. And when all four – character, trust, alignment, and engagement – are present together, something emerges that no leader can install by force: a **culture that demands excellence of itself**, and raises that demand higher over time.

Five essentials. But really, one idea, climbing a ladder. **Congruence** — within a person, between people, among people, between the individual and the enterprise, and finally across the whole.

At every rung, the same thing happens: congruence removes a tax — the verification tax, the directional tax, the self-protection tax, the supervision tax — and what's left is speed, agility, and innovation. That is the Congruence Accelerator, and now you've seen it operate from the inside of a single leader all the way out to the soul of an entire organization.

Here's the truth I'll leave you with. You don't build a great culture by managing the culture. You build it by becoming congruent yourself and then developing congruence at every additional rung of the ladder — person by person, relationship by relationship — until the organization itself takes on your character. The leader goes first. The culture follows. It always has.

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