

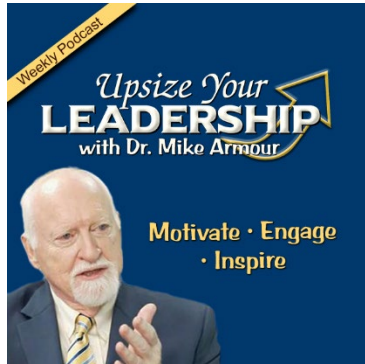
Your Use of Power

The Stress Test of Character

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode: UYL2610

Podcast Date: August 13, 2026



It's debatable whether powerlessness or a position of power is the greatest test of character.

Powerlessness can lead to such desperation that a person does something completely alien to his or her character. On the other hand, we've seen people for whom power "went to their head," as we say, leading them to do things equally out of character.

Which, then, is the greatest stress test for character.

That's where I want to begin today. Because this single question—this tension between the absence of power and the abundance of it—reveals something profound about human nature, leadership, and the way we judge ourselves and others.

Hello, everyone. Welcome to Upsize Your Leadership, the podcast about enhancing your effectiveness wherever you lead, whatever your role. Thanks for joining us again today.

My name is Dr. Mike Armour, a keynote speaker and president of Strategic Leadership Development International, which I founded in Dallas 26 years ago. We are a comprehensive leadership development firm for organizations of all sizes, but with a special focus on the challenges faced by executives in the C-Suite.

You can learn more about me and my firm at LeaderPerfect.com.

All of us, in every relationship, live somewhere on a power spectrum. Power in the relationship is either balanced, or we are in a power down or power up position relative to others in the relationship.

Strength of character governs our actions in all relationships, whatever the distribution of power. But when the distribution is extremely one-sided – when we have no power whatsoever or we have near absolute power – strength of character undergoes a telling stress test.

Some people argue that our true character is most on display when we have **nothing**—no influence, no leverage, no authority. When all that we have is our internal compass. Others argue that character is most visible when we have **everything**—status, authority, resources, and the freedom to act without consequence.

Both sides of the argument make compelling points. Both sides have evidence. And both sides, I believe, are touching different parts of the same truth.

© Copyright 2026, Dr. Mike Armour

www.UpsizeYourLeadership.com

Today, we're going to explore that truth.

We're going to contrast personality and character through the lens of power—what happens when you have none, what happens when you have a lot, and what those moments reveal about who you really are.

And this dynamic is vitally important for us as leaders, because we live constantly in the midst of ever-changing power relationships.

This episode is not about psychology in the abstract. It's about leadership. It's about integrity. It's about the choices that define us. And it's about the uncomfortable reality that character is most fully revealed in the moments that we cannot control.

There are two mirrors that reveal character:

- Powerlessness
- Power

Both expose different dimensions of who we are. Both strip away the masks of personality. And both force us to confront the truth about our values, our motives, and our moral courage.

When you are powerless, you cannot control outcomes. You cannot bend circumstances to your will. You cannot force your preferences on others.

All you have is:

- your discipline
- your patience
- your resilience
- your honesty
- your humility

Powerlessness reveals how you behave when you cannot get what you want.

It reveals:

- whether you blame or take responsibility
- whether you complain or adapt
- whether you manipulate or stay honest
- whether you crumble or persevere

Powerlessness tests your **inner strength**.

Being highly powerful, on the other hand, removes constraints. It gives you options. It gives you influence. It gives you the ability to act without needing permission.

Power reveals:

- whether you exploit or uplift
- whether you dominate or empower
- whether you hoard or share

- whether you serve or demand to be served

Power tests your **moral discipline**.

And here's the paradox:

Powerlessness tests your character through limitation. Being highly powerful tests your character through liberation.

One reveals how you behave when you can't act. The other reveals how you behave when you can.

Both matter. Both expose truth. But they expose different truths.

To understand why these tests matter, we need to contrast personality and character.

Personality is always on display. It's visible, expressive. And people's personality often fools us.

Character, by contrast, is tucked inside. It's quiet and principled. People's character often surprises us.

When we are powerless, personality shows up first:

- Are we optimistic or pessimistic?
- Are we expressive or reserved?
- Are we emotional or stoic?
- Are we agreeable or confrontational?

These traits shape how we respond to frustration, disappointment, and constraint.

But personality does not determine whether we act ethically. Personality does not determine whether we remain honest. Personality does not determine whether we persevere.

Those outcomes stem from character.

Character shows up in choices beneath the personality:

- Do we stay truthful even when lying would be easier?
- Do we remain kind even when we feel ignored?
- Do we keep commitments even when no one is watching?
- Do we maintain dignity even when circumstances strip away comfort?

Powerlessness reveals whether our values are real or performative.

When people gain power, personality often becomes amplified:

- The charismatic become more charismatic.
- The assertive become more assertive.
- The cautious become more cautious.
- The controlling become more controlling.

Power exaggerates tendencies.

But again, personality does not determine whether they act ethically. That determination comes from character.

Character shows up in the choices that power makes possible:

- Do we use authority to serve or to dominate?
- Do we share credit or absorb it?
- Do we protect the vulnerable or take advantage of them?
- Do we stay humble or become entitled?

Power reveals whether our values are anchored or conditional.

Let's return to our opening question: *Is powerlessness or power the greatest test of character?*

The answer depends on what aspect of character you're trying to measure.

Powerlessness tests your endurance.

It reveals:

- resilience
- patience
- honesty under pressure
- humility
- discipline

It shows whether you can maintain integrity when life is unfair.

Power tests your intentions.

It reveals:

- generosity
- fairness
- courage
- responsibility
- moral restraint

It shows whether you can maintain integrity when life is easy.

So, which is the greater test?

Here's the uncomfortable truth:

Powerlessness tests your strength. Power tests your soul.

Powerlessness asks: *Can you stay true to yourself when you have nothing?*

Power asks: *Will you stay true to yourself when you have everything?*

Both are essential. Both are revealing. But power—true power—may be the more dangerous test. Power doesn't just expose character. Power exposes motives.

One of the biggest leadership mistakes is confusing personality with character—especially in people who hold power.

Charisma can hide selfishness. Confidence can hide insecurity. Charm can hide manipulation. Boldness can hide recklessness. Warmth can hide entitlement.

Personality is a performance. Character is a pattern.

And power gives personality a stage.

This is why some leaders look inspiring at first, but prove destructive later. Their personality was compelling, but their character was underdeveloped.

Conversely, some leaders seem quiet, modest, or unassuming—until they gain responsibility. Then their character shines.

Power doesn't change people. Power reveals who they are.

It reveals whether their personality is backed by principle.

Powerlessness has its own dangers. It can breed:

- resentment
- cynicism
- bitterness
- hopelessness
- moral fatigue

When people feel powerless for too long, they may abandon their values—not because they are bad people, but because they are exhausted.

Powerlessness can erode character through despair.

It can tempt people to:

- cut corners
- compromise integrity
- manipulate outcomes
- justify unethical behavior
- blame others for everything

Powerlessness doesn't corrupt through freedom. It corrupts through frustration.

This is why some of the most admirable people are those who maintain dignity in hardship.

Their character is not loud. Their character is not glamorous. Their character is not celebrated. But it is real.

Here's the paradox every leader must confront: **You cannot know your character until you have experienced both powerlessness and power.**

Powerlessness reveals your discipline. Power reveals your ethics.

Powerlessness reveals your resilience. Power reveals your responsibility.

Powerlessness reveals your humility. Power reveals your generosity.

Powerlessness reveals your endurance. Power reveals your intentions.

A leader who has only experienced power may be confident—but untested. A leader who has only experienced powerlessness may be humble—but unproven.

The leaders we trust most are those who have walked through both.

They know what it means to struggle. They know what it means to succeed. They know what it means to be overlooked. They know what it means to be influential. They know what it means to be constrained. They know what it means to be free.

And because they have lived both realities, their character is balanced.

They do not become arrogant in power. They do not become hopeless in powerlessness. They do not confuse personality with virtue. They do not confuse authority with wisdom.

They lead from a place of grounded strength.

If you're a leader—or becoming one—here's the practical takeaway:

Your personality will gain you notice. Your character will gain you trust. And trust is the currency of leadership.

So ask yourself, in powerlessness:

- Do I stay honest when dishonesty would be easier?
- Do I stay disciplined when no one is watching?
- Do I stay kind when I feel ignored?
- Do I stay responsible when I feel constrained?

In power:

- Do I use authority to serve or to elevate myself?
- Do I share credit or absorb it?
- Do I protect the vulnerable or exploit them?
- Do I stay humble or become entitled?

These questions reveal more about your leadership potential than any personality assessment ever will.

So, let's return one last time to the opening statement:

It's debatable whether powerlessness or a position of power is the greatest test of character.

After exploring both sides, here's where we land:

Powerlessness tests your endurance. Power tests your ethics. Both shape you. Both expose you. Both matter.

But the greatest leaders — the ones we admire, the ones we trust, the ones we follow — are those whose character remains intact in both extremes.

They do not abandon who they are when they have nothing. Nor do they abandon who they are when they have everything.

They are the same person in scarcity and abundance. In constraint and freedom. In anonymity and influence.

That is character. That is leadership. And that is the journey that we are all on.

Dr. Mike Armour is the founder and president 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/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.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.