

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Are You a Resolute Leader?

by Dr. Mike Armour

The United States entered the First World War relatively late. The American entry, however, quickly turned the tide of battle.

As the U.S. amassed its presence on the war front, the humorist Will Rogers quipped that Kaiser Wilhelm, the chancellor of Germany, wondered how we could train our soldiers so fast.

"The answer is really quite simple," Rogers noted. "We only train our soldiers to go in one direction."

When you're resolute in the direction that you are going, when your sole interest is to press forward, you don't tend to get drawn off path, off message, or into side issues. Being resolute is thus one of the most powerful qualities in a leader.

How Serious is a Resolution?

"Resolute" comes from a word family that includes "resolution" and "resolve." Even though they all share the same linguistic DNA, "resolute" has not softened in meaning over the years the way "resolution" has.

Strictly speaking, a resolution should be something that you are resolute about. Yet the word often means much less than that.

How many people are truly resolute about their New Year's Resolutions? When the United Nations or Congress passes a "unanimous resolution," how much genuine difference does it usually make in the way the world operates?

Resolutions from government entities often have more nearly the feel of a polite recommendation than of a resolute statement of policy.

In other contexts, however, "resolve" and "resolution" are more weighty terms. To resolve a conflict is a notable achievement. So, too, is finding the resolution of a complex problem. For the moment, then, I want to use the words in this more weighty sense.

Loosening Things Up

If you examine the roots of "resolution," "resolved," and "resolute," you find that they came from a Latin verb meaning "to loosen again." To the ancient Romans, you "resolved" something by loosening it.

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"Resolve" still retains this connotation in a phrase like "resolving a deadlock." In a deadlock the situation is so tight that movement is impossible until things loosen up again.

In the strictest sense of the term, resolving something is like untying a tightly cinched knot. We have to loosen it strand by strand.

In fact, we reach the resolution of a knotty problem or issue not merely by loosening it, but by loosening it so much that it falls apart into its constituent elements.

By seeing these constituent elements clearly and in more meaningful detail, you simplify the challenge so that it can be more readily understood, analyzed, and overcome.

Now let me bring this meandering discussion of etymology back to the issue of leadership. What allows leaders to be resolute is that they have analyzed a challenge, broken it into its constituent parts, examined the parts carefully, and identified the pivotal actions necessary for overcoming the challenge.

Then they have focused tenaciously and almost exclusively on these critical actions.

Resolute leaders do not run around willy-nilly, dissipating their energy by dashing first over here, then over there. Like Will Rogers' soldiers, they are moving in only one direction. They fully understand what is important and they stick with it. No matter what.

This unswerving sense of direction and focus is what constitutes resolute leadership and gives it fervent tenacity.

Resolute? Or Floundering?

When leadership is not resolute, the underlying cause may be that the leader has not broken the problem down sufficiently into its constituent parts, identified the most essential changes to be made, and set a course accordingly. As a result, rather than being resolute, leadership sometimes gives the appearance of floundering.

Breaking the challenge down into its simpler elements has two immediate advantages. First, it allows leaders to analyze the challenge more easily.

Second, this simplification makes it easier to communicate the essence of the challenge to the team. If a challenge is daunting to leadership, it can easily seem insurmountable to the team around them.

The key is to simplify without becoming simplistic. Being overly simplistic serves neither the cause of accurate analysis nor the purpose of team communication. When analysis or solutions are presented in overly simplistic terms, teams either recognize it instantly or wise up to it in short order.

The worst oversimplification is to see a problem as having a single cause. Statements like, "The only reason we have this problem is because . . ." are indicators of oversimplification. In our highly complex world, problems are rarely, if ever, the product of a single cause.

Properly done, resolving a challenge calls for examining the multiplicity of factors and forces at the root of it. When resolutions fail to hold up, it's almost invariably because this initial analysis was not done fully, appropriately, or well.

But analyzing a challenge and identifying a solution is only the starting point. Resolute leadership then requires consistent, focused implementation of the solution. Analysis comes from the intellect. Being resolute comes from character.

To be resolute without having first done proper analysis is foolhardy. To identify a solution without having the strength of character to pursue the solution resolutely is largely a waste of time.

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