

# ***LeaderPerfect Newsletter***

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## **Leadership Under Stress**

**by Dr. Mike Armour**

Nothing reveals character flaws more strikingly than leadership under stress. The very role of leadership puts our character and our emotional maturity under a magnifying glass. Stress then amplifies the magnification.

Yet, leading well under stress is what leadership is ultimately all about. As leaders, we are not judged so much by our performance when things are running well. The real measure of our leadership acumen is how we manage ourselves, the situation, and others when the going is tough.

And the management challenge in tough times begins with self-management. If our character and emotional flaws are ever to become evident, it's likely to be in our reaction to protracted, stressful leadership challenges.

### **Character**

That's why leadership education should always begin with character formation and the development of emotional maturity. Many of the thorniest issues that I deal with as an executive coach are the product of one or more leaders who just never grew up emotionally. Who never developed proper ego strength. Who never formed a genuine ethical core to guide them instinctively.

Under stress, these shortcomings become apparent for everyone to see, even when the flaws have been cleverly masked in the past. That's because times of stress toss us back into our pattern of deeply-formed habits. And habits we learned early in life may not be all that productive when leading under stress.

To illustrate, let me use an example that I often share with coaching clients. In elementary school we were taught a very simple model of an atom. It was shown as having a nucleus made up of protons and neutrons and one or more electrons in orbit around the nucleus. These orbits were often referred to as shells.

We learned that if you pump more energy into an electron, it does not go faster. Instead, it pops out into a higher shell. Conversely, when energy is drained from an electron it drops into a lower shell.

Now apply that analogy to learning new habits. We take on the challenge of forming new habits because we want to change our behavior. We want to elevate ourselves into a higher shell, so to speak.

But like popping the electron into a higher orbit, thrusting ourselves into a higher orbit demands significant effort and energy. The new behavior is not natural for us. It is not yet ingrained as a set of habits.

It takes sustained, long-term effort, however, for this new pattern to become habitual. For months or even years we will be able to maintain this higher orbit only by focusing energy purposefully on the endeavor.

## Staying in Orbit, Even Under Stress

Now what happens when we find ourselves under stress? To cope with the stress, we must find additional energy somewhere. So where do we turn?

Most commonly we tap into the psychic and emotional energy being used to maintain the higher orbit. When we do, we drop back into a lower shell, just like the electron that loses energy. We resort to old patterns of behavior, because we can run them subconsciously and effortlessly. We don't have to devote much energy to them — certainly not the amount of energy required to maintain our higher orbit.

This is a primary reason, then, why character, ego, and moral flaws become so visible in leaders under stress. Because the habits of the higher orbit are not yet fully ingrained, sustaining them under stress is difficult. To build a strong, resilient higher shell, strong enough to manage stress, leaders must begin forming the habits of character and emotional maturity as early as possible.

Which brings me to a closing thought. In order to become great leaders, we must master a staggering array of skills and attitudes. You can't tackle all of them at once. So how do you set priorities within your self-improvement program?

Let me suggest that you strike first at habits that are ill-suited for leading under stress. Ask yourself, "Where is protracted stress most likely to test my mettle as a leader?"

Keep in mind that the stress may not come from your professional life. The stress may arise from challenging health issues in your family or personal financial setbacks. Whatever the source of the stress, you must cope with it effectively while remaining equally effective as leader.

Leaders who excel in times of stress have practiced the habits of great leadership until these habits are now second nature. To master the wherewithal to lead effectively under stress is to master leadership altogether.

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