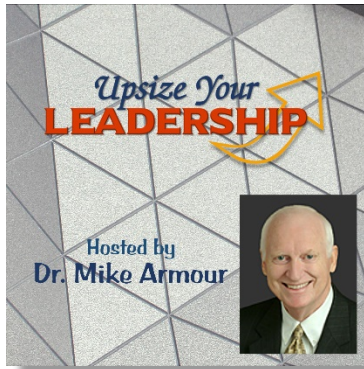# What Every Leader Should Know First

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Today's episode is especially valuable if you lead a team or have the prospect of leading a team in the forseeable future. We're focusing on the one thing which every leader must know first. As the program unfolds, I'm going to guide you through an exercise which will be invaluable to you in any leadership capacity. Whether you're leading a team or leading in some other position, this episode is sure to help you upsize your leadership.

In our last podcast, we talked about eleven traits which distinguish great teams. Toward the end of that podcast, I noted that strong leadership is perhaps the most critical trait of those which we identified. Today I'm going to elaborate on that theme by inviting you to assess your own leadership capability in terms of team-building.

I begin by turning to an admonition from the Greek philosopher Aristotle. He gave us many gems of wisdom. One of his most famous is, "First, know thyself." Let me suggest that if you are to be a good team-builder, the first thing you should know is yourself.

Over the long haul, no team outperforms the quality of its leadership. That being true, you yourself are the ultimate limiting factor on what your team will able to achieve. The first consideration in creating an exceptional team is thus evaluating what you bring to the game as a leader.

What are you good at? What things are you not so good at? What aspects of your personality sometimes make it difficult for others to work with you? What habits do you have that would aggravate you if you saw them in others? If you're going to build a truly great team, you must begin with a realistic picture of yourself.

Sage Advice from a Mentor

As I've mentioned in previous podcasts, the most influential mentor in my own life gave me one piece of advice repeatedly. "We all have a flat side on our wheel somewhere," he would say. "The sooner we recognize that flat side and surround ourselves with people and systems to compensate for it, the sooner we will succeed. And the greater our level of success."

That sums it up quite well. As a team leader, you have been charged with assuring the success of one or more vital functions in your organization . . . functions which are too demanding for one person alone to fulfill. If you could fulfill them by yourself, you would be an individual contributor, not a manager or leader. The responsibility on your shoulders can only be met through team effort. Which is the primary reason that you have a team.

But the team exists for other reasons, too. One of these is to compensate for the flat side on your wheel as the leader. In the words of my mentor, the key to your success is surrounding yourself with people and systems which "round you out." Which compensate for the flat side on your wheel.

For me, the flat side includes staying on top of details. I'm a problem-solver, at heart. Nothing gives me more fulfillment than solving a complex problem, resolving some complicated issue, or helping someone else do likewise. Quite often, however – especially when I'm in a leadership role – I not only need to develop a solution. I need to implement it. And that's where my inadequate attention to detail becomes an issue.

As a rule, I launch the implementation fairly well. But before long, I find myself distracted by some other problem or issue which begs for a solution. The more that I allow myself to be drawn to this new problem, the more I lose focus on the implementation already underway. I start taking my eye off the ball, so to speak. I quit giving details sufficient attention.

My greatest fulfillment, you see, comes from solving problems, not from implementing solutions. That's why I'm so drawn to the new problem which presents itself. Personalities like mine have lives which are cluttered with all sorts of half-finished projects, not because the endeavor was poorly conceived, but because it was not thoroughly executed.

Because my mentor helped me identify that flat side to my wheel, I was able to compensate for it early in my career by means of the staff and systems which I built around me. Whether in collegiate administration, the Navy, or the non-profit sector, I looked for number-two people who relished details, who enjoyed staying on top of them, who were dependable and thorough in their follow-through, and, importantly, who had enough confidence and strength of ego to hold me accountable. I wanted a number-two person who would not hesitate to say, "Boss, the wheels are starting to wobble in our implementation because you've allowed yourself to get distracted."

Discovering Your Flat Side

Looking back, I can truthfully say that my most notable organizational achievements were possible, almost without exception, because of the number-two people who rounded out the flat side of my wheel.

So, what's your flat side? How does that impact your potential as a team leader? What types of people do you need on your team to round out your flat side? Can you face these questions frankly and forthrightly?

Being oblivious to your flat side is one of the most serious toxins to introduce into your team. It leaves you constantly vulnerable to being overly optimistic about what you can accomplish, drawing on your weaknesses instead of your strengths, holding onto responsibilities which you would be wise to delegate, and robbing the team of your focus on what you do best. Teams

rarely perform at a higher level than their leader. So, you are poisoning your team's potential when you ignore the flat side of your wheel.

One of the most common mistakes of team leaders is building a team of people very much like themselves. What they often end up with is a team which is itself flat-sided, since the entire team has the same weaknesses, propensities, and vulnerabilities.

That why team diversity is so important. Remember, you're not the only person on the team whose wheel has a flat side. Every team member also has one. Diversity permits team members to mutually complement one another, to round out the flat side of other team members.

In the case of your individual team members, you probably can identify the flat side of their wheel rather quickly. It's far easier to see the flat side of the wheel in others than to see the flat side of our own wheel.

A Discovery Exercise

Perhaps you've already ascertained your flat side. Or at least have a general notion of what it is. If not – or if your sense of your flat side is not crisply defined – let me recommend an exercise for you.

Here is what I encourage you to do. Carve out some time for deep reflection, time free of distraction or interruption. Have a notepad or several sheets of paper available, as well as a pen or pencil. You're going to be doing some writing. Perhaps quite a bit of it.

You're going to build two lists. We can simply call them List A and List B. While it's possible to do this exercise on a computer, I find that the final results are usually thought through more thoroughly if you compile the two lists by actually writing them out. Writing by hand is a slower, more measured process than hurriedly typing things on a keyboard. And because it is slower, it allows the creative and reflective circuits of the brain more time to do their best work.

When you're ready to begin, write the word "List A" at the top of a sheet of paper, "List B" on top of another. Then, make yourself as comfortable as possible. Begin thinking back to places in your life when your own actions, attitudes, or choices either curtailed success or undercut it altogether.

As you recall instances like this, jot them down on List A, leaving space below each item for additional thoughts. Once no more instances come readily to mind, work through the list again, one item at a time. In the space below each item, add a comment. The comment should describe specifically what you did, did not do, or allowed to happen which diminished or choked off success. Continue filling out comment sections until you have at least one comment for each item on the list.

Next, read through your list of comments reflectively, asking yourself, "Am I seeing common themes or patterns in my comments?" When you recognize a theme or pattern, capture it on List B by writing a description of it. Continue this process until work through all of the comments on List A. You may even want to read through the comments on List A several times at a reflective pace, allowing additional insights to surface.

Moreover, when you add a description to list B, ask yourself, "Have there been other times in my life when this same pattern, or one very much like it played out?" If the answer is "yes," add these episodes to the items on List A.

Continue building out List B as additional themes or patterns surface from your reflection on List A. Your goal with List B is to capture your insights with genuine clarity. The more clearly you describe the patterns which you have recognized, the more helpful List B will be. One way to promote clarity is to express each insight as succinctly as possible. Being succinct forces you to be clear in your thinking.

After you've fully compiled List B, it's now time to read through it reflectively. In all likelihood, the descriptions on List B will provide a broad outline of what constitutes the flat side of your wheel.

On the other hand, you may not have recognized any recurring themes or patterns as you reviewed the comments on List A. In that case, work through the comments again. With each one, ask yourself, "What is this comment an example of?" A particular comment may be an example of procrastination. Or making a rushed decision. Or insufficient planning. Or the failure to adequate research. Or failure to follow through. Use these insights to construct List B. Collectively, the answers to the question, "What is this an example of?" will probably yield at least a general picture of where your flat side lies.

Using What You've Learned

Once you have a sense of your flat side – either because you uncovered it in this exercise or because you already knew it – your next step is to make use of this insight. The operative question becomes, "How can I build structure, systems, and people around me to compensate for my flat side?"

For instance, can the work of your team be reorganized so that there are fewer opportunities for your flat side to hinder team success? Are any of your team members good at what constitutes your flat side? If so, can you profile their responsibilities in such a way that they pick up duties which tend to languish when left entirely to you?

Or perhaps you can enlist a team member who can help hold you accountable, as my number-two people have done for me time and again. This should be someone who is willing to give you prompt feedback whenever they see you slipping into your flat-side tendencies.

If none of these possibilities is viable, then at least this exercise has made you cognizant of your flat side. You can now be more mindful of it, more alert to it. Use this awareness, then, to self-monitor, so that you are quick to realize when you are giving way to your flat side. By recognizing such moments early, you can discipline yourself to adjust accordingly, to choose a more appropriate behavior before your flat side intrudes on team or personal success.

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