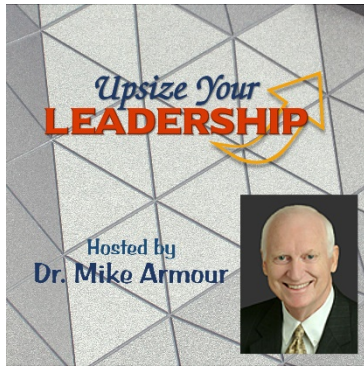


Build New Vision by Reframing the Past

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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Regular listeners may have noticed that I've gone longer than usual in producing a new episode. Let's just say that life got in the way of putting this episode together. But the delay has made me all the more eager to share the thoughts which are planned for today.

Do you remember the musical *Showboat* and the great song entitled *Ol' Man River*? *Ol' Man River*, of course, was the Mississippi. In the next few minutes, I'm going to take you to the Mississippi River to illustrate a fundamental truth about being an effective leader. I hope you'll join us as explore ways to upsize your leadership.

Many of you know that my academic background is in history, specifically the cultural and intellectual history of Europe. Among those who study history extensively, there is a widely-recognized principle. It holds that to define a new vision for the future, you must first develop a new vision of the past.

One of the most noted examples of this principle is the worldview known as Marxism. What Karl Marx did in the mid-nineteenth century was to re-envision the history of human society in terms of class warfare. Others before him had talked about class struggles. But none had made it the overarching theme of human history. For Marx and Engels, however, the defining dynamic of human history was class struggle. This radically different way of viewing history led Marx to envision a radically different concept of the future.

In the twentieth century, Hitler would do something similar. His ideology rested on a view of the past which celebrated the so-called Aryan race as altogether superior to the rest of mankind. Based on this view of the past, Hitler then held that modern-day descendants of the Aryans (the German people, in his judgment) should be masters of the world for the next thousand years – the Third Reich.

We don't have to turn to world-changing movements like Marxism and Naziism, however, to find stellar examples of people who redefine the future by first reinterpreting the past. Leaders who specialize in turning around troubled organizations understand this principle quite well. They often inherit a corporate culture which is demoralized and dispirited because of what has unfolded in recent history. People have little hope for the future because they see the past in a way that leaves them discouraged.

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The first order of business for the turnaround leader is therefore to dislodge the prevailing conclusions about the past and replace them with perspectives which bring renewed optimism. Notice that perspectives of the past shape attitudes in the present. In the case of a turnaround challenge, attitudes which reflect discouragement must be transformed into attitudes of hopefulness and expectation. And the key to this transformation is instilling a different vision of the past in the minds of workers.

Now, it's probably important for me to make a clarification here. I'm not suggesting that a falsified view of the past should be generated. The facts of the past are what they are and cannot be undone or shunted aside. But the interpretation of these facts – the meaning which we attach to them – can be legitimately challenged and modified.

Memories of the past, you see, are at best very selective. What we remember of the past is only a subset of what actually transpired. And within this subset, we recall certain aspects of the memory more vividly and with greater emphasis than we do others. Naturally, the memories which we choose to emphasize determine how we interpret the past.

But when we begin to highlight elements of the memory which we had previously minimized or overlooked, we cast a different light on the past. This, in turn, changes the attitudes about what transpired. And when our sense of the past changes, so too does our sense of what's possible in the future.

I should also note that Hitler and his cohorts did indeed promulgate a false narrative about the past. Some critics of Karl Marx accuse him of the same thing. To the degree that we falsify the past, we are doing something quite different from what I'm advocating here. I'm simply calling for seeing the past from a new perspective, for looking at it through a different frame of reference, not inventing a past out of whole cloth.

Let me illustrate. I once counseled a woman who detested her father because of the inhumane way in which he treated her, both as a child and as a teenager. Her anger and bitterness poisoned her so much that they had robbed her life of joy.

One day I said to her, "Can you imagine what horrible things must have happened to your dad in childhood for him to grow up thinking that it's okay to treat his daughter the way he treated you?"

Prior to that moment, she had never considered the possibility that her father was a victim of cruel abuse himself. Once she entertained that possibility, her attitude toward him shifted. She still could not bring herself to forgive him, which was understandable. He had indeed been a cruel man. But she was no longer restricted to viewing his cruelty as stemming from pure evil. Now she could consider the possibility that his actions grew out of his own mistreatment, making him a victim, just as she was.

This new frame of reference did not excuse his behavior. It was altogether inexcusable. But for the first time in her adult life, she saw the possibility – even the desirability – of reconciling with him so that her own children could know their grandfather.

The way we view our past either enlarges our sense of possibilities for the future or it limits them. Which brings us back to the role of a leader. People look to leaders for hope and inspiration. They want leaders who exude optimism. Leaders who help them see new paths forward.

Leaders can never meet this expectation, however, if they themselves see the future more in terms of limitations than possibilities, more in terms of dangers than in terms of opportunity, more in terms of adversity than avenues of action. And unfortunately, I've seen more than my fair share of people in leadership roles who fell short in each of these measures.

When I ask people like this to tell me their life story, the narrative is revealing. It reminds me of a legendary sign which was posted near the entrance to the AlCan highway in the 1950s. The AlCan highway runs from Dawson Creek, British Columbia through the Yukon territory to Delta Junction, Alaska near Fairbanks. It was hurriedly constructed during the Second World War to supply American troops stationed in Alaska. Because it was built so quickly, it remained unpaved for many years after the war and would not be fully paved until 1992.

Once it opened to the public in 1948, it was more of a well-worn gravel road than a highway. Shortly after you entered it in Canada, you came upon a sign which read, "Choose your rut wisely. You'll be in it for the next thousand miles."

Some people tell their life story as though they have been trapped in a rut for a thousand miles. They talk about past misfortunes and personal setbacks in terms of how their best efforts were thwarted by forces and developments outside of their control. External circumstances, not their own choices and actions, have led to where they are today. It's little wonder, therefore, that they foresee the future as little more than an extension of the rut.

Needless to say, leaders with this outlook – even if it is only held subconsciously – will hardly inspire hope and confidence among their people. Such leaders are merely living out their rut story. Their attitudes and behavior stand in sharp contrast to leaders who see their life as what life coaches call a river story. Let me explain that term.

I saw a map recently which beautifully illustrates the dynamic of river stories. It was a map of the watershed for the Mississippi River. I've provided a copy of the map on the web page for this podcast. It's an impressive graphic.

You see, when we hear someone refer to the Mississippi, we think of that giant waterway flowing south out of Canada through the heart of the U.S. until it pours into the Gulf of Mexico. What we don't immediately think about are the huge tributaries which flow into it along its 2000-mile route. Rivers like the Ohio and the Missouri. And further upstream rivers like the Platte and the Yellowstone rising out of the Rocky Mountains in the West, the Wabash and the Illinois emerging from the hills of the mid-West and the Tennessee, the Cumberland, and the Allegheny finding their headwaters in the Appalachians.

Each of these tributaries adds its output to the Mississippi, making it deeper, broader, and more powerful. And we are not even mentioning dozens of smaller rivers which join the mighty Mississippi as it wends its way south.

Leaders who tell their life story as a river story view the past like the flow of the Mississippi. Everything which has happened to them is seen as a tributary which made them deeper, broadened their experience, helped them become wiser, and equipped them with powerful resources for the future. To them, setbacks have been an occasion to assess what they might have done differently and to give them a wider array of insights going forward. They see the cumulative impact of their past as positioning them to triumph over whatever challenges the future may throw at them.

Which is not to say that they think of past misfortunes and setbacks in some glib or frivolous way. They can speak candidly about the pain and disappointment which they felt when dreams went unfulfilled or well-laid plans went astray. And although they needed time to integrate learnings from these experiences into the deeper wisdom which the past has given them, the fact is that with time they made that integration.

It reminds me of one of my favorite vantage points on the Mississippi. It's just south of Cairo, Illinois at a place called Fort Defiance. Fort Defiance overlooks the point where the Ohio and the Mississippi join forces. Unless there has been heavy flooding upstream on the Ohio, it reaches Fort Defiance flowing clear, with a tint of blue or green to the water. The Mississippi by contrast arrives at Fort Defiance brown and drab, laden with the heavy sediment which gives it the nickname of the Big Muddy.

There's an observation tower at Fort Defiance that allows you a panoramic view of the two rivers joining forces and pressing on toward the south. From that vantage point, the clear Ohio is flowing in from your left, the Mississippi flowing in on your right. Once they converge, an interesting phenomenon occurs. For three or four miles downstream, their waters do not mingle. You can see the line of demarcation between the clear water of the Ohio and the brown water of the Mississippi.

Twenty miles downstream, this distinction no longer exists. Little by little, the Mississippi has swallowed the Ohio. This delayed mixing of the waters can make for an intriguing site in the dead of winter. I've stood on the observation tower when the Mississippi was ice-covered above Fort Defiance, but the Ohio was running ice-free. Looking south from where they converged, the west half of the river lay coated in ice while the east half was open water.

When we view our life as a river story, we are ready to embrace and envelop whatever flows into it, to learn from the experience, and to integrate what we learn into the way we tackle the future, much like the Mississippi absorbing the Ohio. Which then leads me to the question which I want to pose for you today. To what extent do you see your life as a rut story or a river story? We have a distinct choice in the matter. We choose how we view the past. We can view it in a way which diminishes our sense of possibilities for the future. Or we can view it in a way which enlarges these possibilities.

To me, the choice between the two viewpoints is a no-brainer. I prefer a prospective future brimming with possibilities as opposed to one overtaxed with limitations. I'm going to do my utmost, therefore, to frame my past as a river story, not a rut story.

And what about the organization you lead, whether it's the organization as a whole or a component within it? Does your organization see its past as a river story or a rut story? If the latter, what can you do, as a leader, to change that perception? What can you do to unleash new potential for the future by helping your people re-envision their past?

In organizations as much as in our personal lives, the way we perceive the past determines how we will see the future.

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