

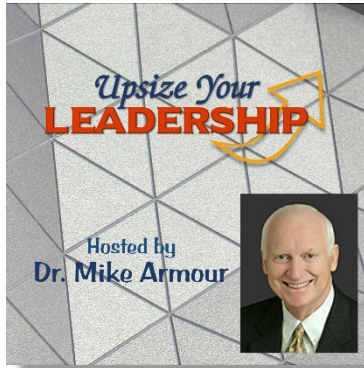
# The 3 Essential Leadership Skillsets

## *Everything Hinges on These Three*

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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Today I want to talk about leadership against the backdrop of three skillsets which are essential for effective leadership. I think of them as the three hinges on the door which opens to leadership success.

Time will not permit me to explore these skillsets in depth. But I offer them as a template for you to follow in setting your priorities to upsize your leadership.

And to set the backdrop for my thoughts, let me begin with my definition of leadership and the roles which a leader plays.

Those of you who are longtime listeners have heard me share this definition before. For the benefit of everyone else, let me reiterate it.

I define leadership as the art of rallying people around a shared purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it. Given this definition, the mandate for leaders is to pull people together and move them toward a desired future.

Notice that the word “people” plays a central role in both this definition and this mandate. That’s because leadership is always people-centric, whereas management tends to be process-centric. Or to put it another way, leaders are always preoccupied with making people as effective as possible, managers with making processes as productive as possible.

And because leadership is people-centric, its first essential skillset – the first hinge of leadership success, if our would -- is people skills. If a leader’s success turns on the ability to connect with people and bring out their best, it only stands to reason that the leader must first have proficiency in understanding people. Leaders have no choice but to be perpetual students of people and what makes them tick.

Believe it or not, for many of my coaching clients, this is the single greatest hurdle between them and great leadership. A large number of my clients, you see, come from fields like IT, engineering, architecture, financial analysis, accounting, medical research, manufacturing, and technology. What’s common about these fields is that their primary sphere of activity is solving problems with things.

As a consequence, people who are attracted to these professions are commonly far more interested in solving problems related to things rather than problems related to people. Had they

been drawn to solving problems with people, they would have probably chosen a different career path.

This penchant for thing problems creates a major challenge when these workers rise to the ranks of management. Once in management, they discover that a heavy percentage of their time – sometimes the bulk of it – is given, not to solving problems with things, but to solving problems with people. Nothing in their academic or professional preparation equipped them to be a go-to person for people problems.

In effect, to succeed as leaders – or even as good managers, in many instances – they must be retrofitted with people skills. Some are able to develop these skills on their own over an extended period of time. Others, wanting to accelerate this process, turn to coaches like me to help them master personality differences, motivational differences, and value differences among people. In fact, most of my coaching engagements in recent years have been with clients who recognized the inadequacy of their people skills.

As our workforce becomes more ethnically and culturally diverse, differences among workers are becoming more and more pronounced. And because human beings are indeed so diverse and their personalities so multi-faceted, none of us will master everything that there is to know about them. We must be prepared to be lifelong learners in terms of understanding people.

Because leadership is people-centric, the second essential skillset is communication. Remember that our definition of leadership describes the leader as rallying people and motivating them to pursue a particular purpose. Neither of these roles can be fulfilled without effective interpersonal communication, both in large group settings and in one-on-one conversations.

And if there is always more to learn about people, there is always something more to improve in communication. In the last twenty years I've coached hundreds of men and women in a vast array of companies, from mom-and-pop startups to Fortune 100 giants. Early on I learned that there was one statement which I would never hear in any of these settings. No one would ever say, "You know, we don't really have any communication problems around here."

Wherever people come together, communication problems are sure to ensue. Sometimes the problems are inconsequential. But commonly they are so significant that they lead to confusion, needless suspicion, or even outright disarray.

Communication skills, like people skills, are never fully mastered. We simply pledge ourselves as leaders to gaining greater and greater proficiency in both arenas. The challenge in mastering people skills is the diversity of personalities, values, thought processes, and culture. The challenge in mastering communication skills is even more complex.

People, you see, are uniquely meaning-making creatures. We are troubled when things don't make sense to us. We forever try to find the why which explains what we see and experience. The why question is our way of imposing meaning on what happens to us or around us. Thus, when someone communicates with us, we immediately start sorting through the verbiage to isolate what it means.

So many factors impact the meaning which people attach to statements that it's a wonder that we ever successfully communicate, at all. I have a keynote speech that I've delivered on a number of occasions entitled, "Communication Isn't Difficult. It's Impossible."

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The first and foremost challenge in communication is maintaining congruence between the intention behind the speaker's words and the meaning which hearers put on those words. Having mediated no small number of organizational conflicts in the past, I've concluded that most communication failures result from misalignment between the speaker's intention and the meaning which the hearer imposes on the speaker's words.

This brings us full circle, then, to people skills. To excel at communication skills, we have to understand people, how they think, how they process information, how they reason through what they hear or read, what they notice or don't notice in the delivery of a message. Or to put it another way, one of the major complexities in communication is the complexity of the differences between the people involved.

Yet, until we practice people skills and communication skills astutely, we can never capitalize on the third hinge of successful leadership, which is trust-building skills. Love holds people together. Trust holds communities together. In fact, a case can be built that trust was the first social virtue which mankind had to master.

Think back to primitive times, when to provide for their clan or family, hunters had to go out on lengthy expeditions to find game, slay it, and bring it home. Before they could undertake that venture, they had to trust those who remained behind. The hunters needed to have confidence that their property would not be stolen or destroyed by those left behind in the village. They had to feel assured that if a family member was injured or became ill, others in the village would take care of them.

Meanwhile, the village had to trust that the hunters would indeed bring back the game which they killed rather than merely building a fire and eating it all themselves. Without trust, the entire human enterprise becomes all but impossible. That's why historically, when trust breaks down on a wholesale basis, people are soon living by the motto, "Every man for himself." A society where this is the prevailing motto is doomed to chaos and probable destruction.

One critical function of the leader is to convince everyone to sacrifice personal self-interest to the broader needs of the group. Where everyone is pursuing self-interest above everything else, no human community, in the workplace or anywhere, can maintain solidarity, cohesion, and effectiveness.

Before people will sacrifice self-interest, however, they must trust both the leader and the group to do what is right by them. The leader is the one ultimately charged with developing high levels of trust within the group. And this begins with the leader proving himself or herself so trustworthy that the group invests its trust in the leader.

When we study trust-building in depth, as I did in my book *Leadership and the Power of Trust*, we find that successful trust-building rests on strong people skills and well-developed communication skills. Trust prevails only where people feel safe, informed, respected, valued, and understood. And leaders generate this kind of atmosphere only when they excel at both people and communication skills.

As you can see, I've introduced three very broad topics in this podcast. That's why I said at the outset that I could not treat them in depth in this limited bloc of time. But my listeners are people who want to upsize their leadership so that it can be as successful as possible. My goal in this episode has therefore centered on helping you clarify where your priorities should lie in

enhancing your leadership success. The doorway to that success turns on three hinges which must be well-oiled: people skills, communication skills, and trust-building skills.

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*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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