Ukraine's Battlefield Cultural War

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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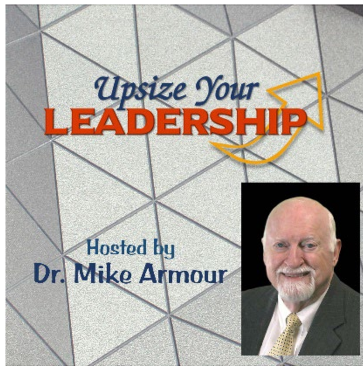

For the past six weeks, world attention has been riveted on the war in Ukraine. A historic conflict is underway there, to be sure, one which will be studied in the annals of military history for generations. The strategic, tactical, and logistics aspect of the war fascinates me as a retired Navy captain and as a historian with a master's degree in diplomatic and military history.

As a leadership development specialist, however, it's another war going on within the larger conflict that intrigues me even more. This war-within-a-war is a clash of two cultures. I'm not speaking of Russian social culture versus Ukrainian social culture, even though that cultural clash is certainly at play. No, I'm talking about a clash of organizational cultures. The organizational cultures of two opposing armies. Two organizational cultures with very different concepts of leadership.

These conflicting views of leadership are not unique to war in Ukraine. They both have their practitioners in corporate and institutional cultures everywhere. And it's this cultural conflict about leadership which is our topic for today's podcast.

There's a common maxim in politics that "elections have consequences." My theme today is that styles of leadership have consequences. And if you're looking for a case study to underscore this principle, you need look no further than the battlefields of Ukraine. And that's what we're doing for the next 20 minutes. We are going to use what's happening in Ukraine as a case study in the consequences, for better or worse, which flow from one's choice of leadership styles. Lessons which you take away from this episode will certainly help you upsize your leadership.

In recent podcasts I've drawn on my extensive experience in Ukraine to alert listeners to trends to anticipate in the conflict. As it has turned out, it has almost been as though the media were taking cues from my podcasts. In the very first hours of the invasion, I talked about the spirit of nationalism which had gelled in Ukraine in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea. No one else was touching on that subject at the time. But a week later, it was a theme playing out on almost every news channel. In later episodes I talked about how inventive and improvisational I had found the Ukrainians to be. And again, within a week, there were stories everywhere about the imaginative ways in which Ukrainians were finding innovative tactics and techniques for facing down the Russians.

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With this episode, I'm not so much ahead of the curve. I'm elaborating on certain realities which on-the-scene commentators have already begun to note. What I'm going to do, however, is take you deeper into my topic than others have done.

In a podcast last month, I argued that the Ukrainians competitive advantage was that they were proving themselves able to learn and adapt faster than the Russians. But I didn't fully elaborate on why that's the case. I can tell you, however, that no matter how long this war persists, the Russians will never be able to learn and adapt as fast as the Ukrainians. And for a simple reason. The Russians have chosen a leadership model which does not facilitate quick learning and adaptation. The Ukrainians have.

Moreover, the Russian leadership model is so ingrained with certain outlooks from greater Russian culture that it is almost intransigent to change. And to explain why it is so ingrained, I do have to draw some contrasts between Russian culture and Ukrainian culture in general.

I actually began teaching leadership in Russia several years before I ever made my first trip to Ukraine. My earliest weeklong workshops in Russia were in cities along the Op River, flowing northward to the Arctic Ocean from the Altai Mountains of western Siberia. I met hundreds of wonderful people there. Warm, caring, and generous once they got to know you. And they displayed a sense of humor which I always found refreshing.

But beneath the warmth and laughter was a somber tone which was hard for me as an outsider to miss. If I had to describe this tone in one word, I would call it a spirit of resignation. They were willing to talk freely about things which displeased them in the economy or their workplace or the body politic. But they seemed to end such talk with a psychological shrug of the shoulders which said, "But what can you do? That's just the way things are." They were almost fatalistic in their resignation.

Because of my personal interest in leadership, I was also struck by how reluctant people were to identify themselves as a leader. I remember training the deputy directors of all the universities and institutes in one sprawling Russian province. An oblast, as they call them. Whenever I referred to one of these deputy directors as a leader, he or she would respond in a strident tone, "I am not a leader. I am only a deputy director."

During the Soviet era, you see, identifying yourself as a leader made you a potential threat for someone higher in the political hierarchy. And under the harsh realities of Soviet politics, if you were perceived as a threat, you had a way of simply disappearing. People took great care, therefore, neither to identify themselves as leaders nor to take initiatives which might cause others to look to them as leaders. This reluctance continues to this day in many quarters.

Another thing which struck me was how guarded the average Russian was about the outside world. To visitors from the West, their guardedness seemed to border on paranoia. This guardedness stemmed partially from 70 years of communist propaganda which had trumpeted the message that the non-Marxist world was out to destroy Russia. But the roots of the guardedness were deeper than that.

Russia's history is checkered with painful – even ghastly invasions. Early on it was the Mongols who swept across the Asian steppes, destroyed Kiev, burned Moscow, and imposed a heavy, harsh rule. Centuries later the invaders came from the opposite direction. Napolean in the 19th century. Nazi Germany in the 20th. The scope of death in these invasions was staggering. Over 200,000 Russian soldiers died in stopping Napoleon and another 150,000 were wounded.

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Civilian and military casualties in the Nazi invasion reached into the millions, with 15% of the Russian population dying during the Second World War.

For the average Russian, patriotic pride is anchored in their nation's long-suffering perseverance which eventually led to triumph over first the Mongols, then Napoleon, and more recently the Nazis. Russian literature and folklore celebrate the glory of these triumphs and the heroism which led to them. But while these stories instill patriotic fervor, they also serve as a steady reminder that Russia has a long history of suffering at the hands of foreign invaders. The outside world is thus viewed with calculated misgiving.

After several trips to Russia, I made my first trip to Ukraine. I visited as a guest speaker at a symposium hosted by the National Academy of Science. As I began to build acquaintances in Ukraine, the contrast in outlooks between them and my associates in Russia was striking. The Ukrainians, far from being guarded about the outside world, were eager to know more about it and embrace it whenever it seemed to offer a worthwhile benefit. They were open learners, unafraid of any question and unhesitant to challenge any answer with which they disagreed.

And no one shied away from wanting to be a leader. I encountered very little of the passive resignation which I so commonly found in Russia. I never heard even the slightest hint of fatalism from them. The Ukrainians as a people were opportunistic and optimistic in their outlook and fully persuaded that they could effect change for the better. It was this spirit which fueled the Orange Revolution a few years later.

Now, fast forward 15 years from my first visit, and let's see how these differences in cultural outlook translate into leadership styles on the battlefront. In the first years after the USSR collapsed, the culture of the Ukrainian army basically mirrored what it had been in the Soviet era. But that is no longer the case. The Ukrainians have completely replaced the concepts of leadership which they inherited from Soviet army doctrine. Russia, on the other hand, has clung to the old doctrine with tenacity.

In the Soviet political system, those in charge did everything possible to restrict independent decision-making only to those at the highest levels of authority. In this way, those at the top could more easily maintain control and at the same time minimize the ability of ordinary citizens to organize and mount a rebellion.

In the armed forces, this authoritarian approach meant that lower-level officers had no authority to act independently. Moreover, they were given no training in leadership or battlefield innovation. After all, why waste time teaching leadership and initiative to someone who will never be allowed to exercise it? Similarly, enlisted personnel were trained only in the operation of weapons and the necessity of following orders. Their role was merely to do what they were told and to do it unquestioningly. And the Russian army does not have a corps of non-commissioned officers in the enlisted ranks, as we take for granted in the West.

Contrast the Russian approach to the American military, where leadership training starts in the very first weeks of boot camp or basic officer training. Responsible initiative is encouraged, even expected of those at every level of a fighting organization. And when unit officers are lost in battle, the non-commissioned enlisted people are ready and duty-bound to take command.

The leadership style in today's Ukrainian army is more aligned with the American battlefield philosophy than the Russian one. This is not because they made a purposeful decision to follow the American model, although they admit that they borrowed heavily from it. Instead, Ukrainian

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military officials made a stylistic pivot after Russia invaded Donbass and later annexed Crimea during the Obama Administration.

As the Ukrainians tried to push back the Donbas invasion, they discovered that modern warfare is fast-paced, based on advanced technologies, and presents combatants on the battlefield with constantly changing scenarios. Their early setbacks and losses convinced the Ukrainians that they needed two things – better technology and a faster, more nimble means of making decisions in combat.

You will recall that one of my earlier podcasts identified the competitive advantage of the Ukrainians in this war as their ability to learn and adapt faster than the Russians. Nowhere is this adaptive spirit better illustrated than in the way in which Ukraine abandoned the command-and-control doctrine which they had inherited from the Soviet past. In its place, they began fighting in smaller, more nimble units, arming these units with the best weapons at the country's disposal, and giving them the freedom to select their own targets, choose their own timing for attack, and to make their own decisions about how best to reposition themselves as the fighting unfolds.

Meanwhile, Russian units on the other side are waiting for decisions from above on what to target, when to attack, and whether to advance, withdraw, or reposition. Their lower-level officers can't exercise independent decision-making, even if they dared to, because they've usually not been briefed on the overall objective which the current operation is meant to achieve. Their role, after all, is merely to see that soldiers under their command follow orders.

The authoritarianism of the Russian leadership style is a logical extension of the authoritarian government which it serves. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian military style now centers on empowerment. Authoritarian leadership basically operates on the principle of, "I say. You do." An empowerment style of leadership operates on the principle, "I say. You decide the best way to do."

Ukraine was able to adopt this empowering style because it aligns well with attitudes which pervade the overall Ukrainian culture. Remember that I've described the Ukrainians as characteristically optimistic, opportunistic, and innovative. People who embody such outlooks easily grasp the value of delegated authority, empowerment, and freedom of initiative. Put simply, Ukrainians as a whole have a much richer concept of leadership than prevails in Russia, where the public still generally embraces authoritarianism and authoritarian control.

Because they are willing to empower those who lead on the battlefield, Ukrainian forces have been able to strike quickly without laborious, time-consuming decision making. Time and again they have mounted imaginative attacks which have inflicted mind-boggling casualties on the Russians and destroyed a staggering amount of their equipment.

In the midst of this, the Russian army *should be* having a learning experience of their own, not unlike the one which led the Ukrainians to transform their approach to both warfare and leadership. But for the Russian army, such a learning experience is beyond the realm of possibility. Its military culture is as much an extension of the Russian culture as the new Ukrainian military culture embodies the values of broader Ukrainian culture.

Although there are pockets of reform in Russia, the general populace is not strongly anti-authoritarian. Their spirit of resignation allows them to tolerate what they dislike about authoritarian rule without rejecting it outright. Soldiers brought up in this social culture are ill-

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prepared to start thinking of themselves suddenly as potential leaders. To them, leadership is – and should be – a prerogative exercised only by those at the top. Empowerment is a foolhardy enterprise with people whose environment has conditioned them to minimize personal initiative.

Moreover, authoritarian leaders never readily relinquish control unless forced to do so. And the Russian armed forces are fully in the hands of tough-minded, hardline authoritarians. For people with such mindsets, failure on the battlefront can only be explained by scapegoating those on the front lines. Either they are traitors or they are undisciplined or they are refusing to follow orders passed down from above. Organizations cannot learn and scapegoat at the same time.

The Ukrainians believe in their people on the front line. The Russians basically do not. Will Russian army culture eventually change? That all depends, I believe, on the outcome of this war. If Russia prevails in the end, their victory over the crafty Ukrainians will only cement their conviction that victory validates their leadership style.

If Russia loses, there is at least a limited possibility that they might consider a different approach to military leadership. But I'm more inclined to believe that they will not. In my judgment, their likely reaction will be to retrench in their authoritarian style after a season of purges to satisfy their need to find scapegoats. Entrenched cultures are very difficult and slow to change. And those cultures will rise up to thwart a leader who does not adequately embody the values which the culture holds dear.

Now, in all of this there are obvious lessons for leaders in American businesses, institutions, and government agencies. As I've said often on this podcast, sustained success in today's environment demands that organizations be quick, agile, and innovative. Otherwise, they will be left choking in the dust of their competition. Authoritarianism puts a solid cap on speedy decisions, agile adaptivity, and timely innovation. Yet, authoritarian leadership is far from dead in upper echelons of American organizational life. I run into it routinely as I carry leadership development services into American corporate cultures. If nothing else, the war in Ukraine has exposed the ultimate liabilities of strong authoritarianism. And it has likewise underscored the telling impact of proper empowerment.

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