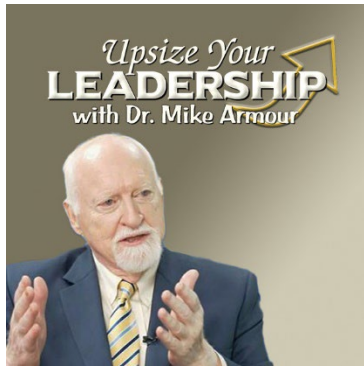# Without This, You Can't Lead

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode UYL2319

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No one steps into a leadership role with an intent to be mediocre at it. In my judgment, the fact that you've accepted leadership responsibilities implies that you want to be good at the craft.

And being effective as a leader is not identical with being effective as a manager. In the course of a career, we encounter no shortage of good managers who are not necessarily effective leaders. By the same token, even inspirational leaders can prove to be rather ineffective at management.

Certain minimums are required for success in both endeavors. Today, I'm dealing with one requirement which must be met in any leadership role in order for the person holding that role to be genuinely recognized as a leader. And this requirement is universal. At any level of leadership duties. In any organization. In every society around the world.

Stay with me for the next fifteen minutes. What we are about to explore is sure to upsize your leadership.

When I conduct workshops on leadership and management, I draw a number of contrasts between the two. One of these is the basic difference between how leaders get things done and the way that managers get things done.

In this regard, managers have a resource at their disposal which may or may not be available to them as a leader. Namely managers hold an organizational title, a slot on the organization chart. And by virtue of that slot, they possess what I would call "positional authority." The power inherent in that position allows them to compel people to do or not to do specific things.

Leaders do not have the inherent power to compel. That's because leaders do not necessarily occupy slots on the organization chart. In my quarter century as a leadership coach and business consultant, I've literally worked with hundreds of organizations. Without exception, the larger the organization, the more often I find people who are looked to for leadership, even though they do not hold a managerial title. They are simply so broadly and so highly respected that other people in the organization view them as leaders.

If they lack managerial authority to compel, then how do leaders get results? They do so by means of their influence. Managers have the option to compel. Leaders, functioning purely in a

leadership capacity, have only the power of personal influence. So, where does this influence come from?

It all boils down to one word: credibility. People follow leaders because the leader possesses commanding credibility. This does not mean that credibility is of no consequence to managers. Managers, too, need to be seen as credible. But credibility is somewhat secondary for them. If their credibility takes a drubbing, they can still get things done by falling back on their ability to compel.

For leaders, by contrast, credibility is primary. Without credibility, you cannot lead. And the reason is simple. For any of us, our degree of influence correlates directly with our depth of credibility. What then determines our credibility?

Fundamentally, it boils down to two things. First, is the nature of the relationship that we have with the person making a judgment about our credibility. Second, is some combination of three factors, a combination that will change, based on the nature of this relationship. So let's take a moment to look at the nature of relationships.

For our purposes here, let me classify all relationships under three headings. First are social relationships. Second are professional relationships. And third are operational relationships. Obviously, the vast majority of our relationships are social. They do not venture beyond peer-to-peer interactions and conversations built around day-to-day routines and issues of life.

Professional relationships, as the name implies, are those which have us drawing on the expertise of a recognized authority or specialist for advice that is personally vital. Think of conversations with a doctor. Or an attorney. Or a tax accountant. Professional relationships also include conversations with consultants, coaches, or mentors.

Operational relationships are those which exist within a formal or informal organizational structure, where there are distinct managerial or leadership roles. The structure can be hierarchical. Or it can be built around highly collaborative decision-making, as in the board of a non-profit. Within this structure, however, whatever its design, certain parties are seen as responsible for keeping the group on course.

I wanted to introduce these three types of relationships, because the elements of credibility differ from one to another. Let's look first at social relationships. To have credibility in those settings, the primary requisite is to be a person of character. Someone who is seen as honest, respectful, straightforward, caring, ethical, truthful, and reliable.

Character is fundamental to all three types of relationships – social, professional, and operational. But in professional and operational settings, other factors are equally weighty. In all of these instances, we need to distinguish between character and reputation. The word character comes from the ancient Greek word for a die-stamp, the kind that was used to emboss the emperor's profile on a coin. Character is literally what is stamped on us.

Reputations, on the other hand, are manufactured and sometimes purposefully manipulated. They are a projection of how we are perceived, as opposed to character, which is a reflection of who we genuinely are. Ideally, our reputation and our character are reasonably congruent. That is, what people see is what they get with us. If reputation and character diverge, however, people will make their judgments about our credibility on the basis of character.

To cite examples, over the years I've come to know people personally whose reputation had preceded them. In some cases, it was not a particularly flattering reputation. Once I became well-acquainted with them, however, I discovered that they had a far more wholesome character than their reputation had led me to believe. When I discovered their true character, and when it was so much more admirable than their reputation, their credibility actually went up in my eyes.

By contrast, I've become friends with some highly acclaimed people, whose public persona was widely admired. Once we became well-acquainted, however, I discovered that their behavior when people were watching was quite different from some unsavory aspects of their private life. Recognizing, then, that I had misread their character – that is, having assumed that their reputation and character were aligned – I now lowered my perception of their character. And concurrently, their credibility went down in my sight.

At the most basic level, character and reputation differ in this way. We determine our character. Others determine our reputation. It's how they see us and what they say about us that fabricates the reputation by which we are known. Ultimately, therefore, we cannot control our reputation. What we can do is to be judicious in our actions and words so that we do not needlessly give ammunition to people who decide to besmirch our reputation by practicing character assassination.

I've spent this time delving into the nature of character because it is fundamental to all three types of relationships which we are considering. That is to say, when I enter a professional relationship, I want the doctor or attorney or consultant or coach or mentor to be a person of character. Likewise, we have high character expectations of those who set the initiative in operational relationships. No leader or manager maintains high credibility if flaws in their character become widely recognized.

Indeed, one of the things which happens in managerial advancement is that the higher we go in an organization, the more apparent flaws in character are likely to become. Because our decisions and actions are so much more consequential than they were at a lower management position, weaknesses in character are more easily seen. They are more-or-less put under a magnifying glass. Inevitably, however, managers and leaders lose credibility when people begin to question their character.

Moving to professional relationships, character (as we've seen) remains paramount. But now a second consideration is equally important –competence. No professional is seen as credible if they do not seem to be fully competent. Credentials and certifications cannot substitute for professional competence.

To return to our earlier comparison of reputation and character, credentials and certifications contribute to a professional's reputation. But they have no necessary bearing on his or her competence. That's why we encounter so many professionals who are widely recognized as thoroughly competent even though they lack the credentials of many others in their profession.

Character flaws, we have noted, often become exaggerated as people rise higher and higher in management. In a similar vein, competency limitations become more apparent as the scope of professional responsibility broadens. During my 35-year Navy and naval reserve career, I saw many an officer gain promotion to a fairly senior position, only to be seen as incompetent to perform adequately at that level. Their incompetence had been there all along. But it had been masked from view so long as they were in lesser roles which did not expose it.

When we move into operational relationships, character still reigns supreme. Some of the most noted researchers on leadership have concluded that 80% of a leader's success relates directly or indirectly to quality of character. The importance of competence remains unabated, as well.

Some of those unwisely promoted naval officers to whom I alluded a moment ago were people of tremendous character. No one questioned the moral fiber of their character. But shortcomings in competence doomed their leadership. I knew some that the Navy purposefully retired early because, given the problems with their competence, there was no other command position to put them in.

Once we step into managerial or leadership posts, however, stellar character and unquestioned competence are not enough – by themselves – to assure our credibility. A third element is required, namely, concrete results. Remember, we started this podcast by talking about how managers and leaders get things done. Getting the right things done is their primary directive, whatever their level of management or leadership.

And the fact of the matter is that many people of stellar character and superb competence are not necessarily good at achieving concrete results. Once that becomes apparent, their credibility as a manager or leader loses its luster. They may retain credibility in terms of character or competence. But their credibility at producing concrete results is sorely compromised.

This loss of credibility has an adverse impact on the effectiveness of both managers and leaders. But it's especially deadly for people who are viewed primarily as leaders rather than managers. Again, managers who suffer from credibility issues still have positional authority to compel compliance with what they want done. Leaders, however, gain compliance through influence. And once a leader does not achieve the right concrete results, people are ready to move on to a leader who can hit that mark.

I should add that the ability to produce concrete results has a situational component to it. Business history is replete with stories of executives who had stellar concrete results in one company, who were then hired by another company on the basis of those results. In the second post, however, they failed to produce and were often summarily dismissed. Commonly, these same people moved onto still a third post where, once again, they were highly successful.

In other words, they had not lost the capability of achieving concrete results. But while their approach, outlook, and style of leadership were highly successful in one setting, they yielded less than acceptable results in others. In part, that's because producing concrete results is possible only when methodologies are aligned with the organizational culture. Sometimes senior executives are put into scenarios where their style of management or leadership is too much of a break with the prevailing corporate culture. And when that happens, the final outcome is no verdict on the executive's ability to achieve concrete results. It's a verdict on his or her ability to achieve concrete results in that particular culture.

In summary, then, credibility builds on three considerations: character, competence, and concrete results. In social relationships, credibility depends almost exclusively on character. In professional relationships, both character and competence are decisive in determining credibility. And in operational relationships, character, competence, and concrete results are all essential if credibility is to be robust.

And since leadership is ultimately charged with getting concrete results, without personal credibility, you cannot lead.

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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.

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