

# Leadership in the Crucible: The Paradox of Character and Power

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*A servant leader explores three "courses" essential to learning to lead—reflective work that results in a guiding life purpose or mission; learning from the life and experiences of mentors; and being part of a community of practice that learns together and holds each other accountable.*

"Nearly all men can stand the test of adversity, but if you really want to test a man's character, give him power."

-- Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln was no stranger to adversity; nearly all biographies and illustrations concerning the greatness of Lincoln stress the many setbacks and hardships he endured before he reached the presidency. Even then, students of perhaps the greatest leader in our nation's history find that he only had begun to face the opposition and severe personal and leadership challenges of national divisions and war that plagued his life until his untimely death. How is it then that in his own estimation, the ultimate test of his leadership capacity--and his character--came not in the loss of a child or the betrayal of friends; neither in the repeated failures to be elected to office nor in the unprecedented slaughter of the young men that he had called upon to wage war against their brothers? Rather, it came in reaching the very goal that he had so long sought--leadership of the nation. What a paradox. Yet this is the paradox that ultimately tests the character of all who aspire to reach leadership once they arrive. It is the ultimate crucible of leadership. And sadly, from what I hear in my work, many fail that test.

## **Growing Future Leaders**

For almost eight years now, I have been spending much of my time--the second half of life--on the purpose of helping to grow the next generation of public service leaders. My 35 years in government had convinced me that the need for growing good leaders is a large, and often misunderstood, challenge and one that is generally not well addressed in any systematic fashion. The recent survey of human capital only underscored the widespread beliefs that most federal employees do not trust or respect their senior leaders. A lot of my research in these past years and extensive interaction with both rising and current senior government leaders only has confirmed that conclusion. But also I realized how little I really did know eight years ago and how much there is yet to learn about how to prepare good leaders for the task.

What I have concluded is that developing future leaders lays not in the lack of systematic and intentional leadership development programs in government--what is now called human capital planning or leadership succession programs--and which does remain a gap. Rather, the larger issue lays squarely in resolving the very paradox that Lincoln understood so well. Developing character in leaders that will withstand the crucible of acquired power over others--whether as a GS-13 team leader, a senior executive, or an assistant secretary--this is the central, root issue to address. This "character gap" remains both the most discussed and yet least acted upon leadership challenge in public service today. How can I say that? Simple. It is the parable of the emperor's clothes--or at least that is the story that seems to be told most often to me.

## Great Leaders—Lousy Leaders

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."  
"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.  
"Not because you are?"  
"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."  
--from *Prince Caspian* in *The Chronicles of Narnia*

Some leaders grow in our estimation. The better we know them; the more often we see them in tight circumstances; the higher they go in rank--we learn what lies in their hearts and we like what we "see." For others, it is the opposite--we begin to realize that they are without the clothes of trusted leadership in the crucibles of work and life.

Let me elaborate on that somewhat disturbing observation by using an illustration of something I have used with young leaders to demonstrate why we follow others--in other words what is it most people look for in a leader? In short, why would someone follow you? It is a simple exercise called Great Leaders -- Lousy Leaders. Having done it now probably at least 50 times I can almost predict the outcome. (And, by the way, "great" and "lousy" refer to their leadership and not necessarily to the people, themselves.)

Think of two people for whom you have worked. Each one asks you to come work for him or her again--he or she is starting a new leadership job and wants you on board the bus. If the first one were to ask, you would drop what you are now doing in a heartbeat to go with him or her to help get the job done. However, if the second one approached you with the same request, you would get away from him or her--and without a second thought. Now here is the question: What qualities do each possess that would cause you either to follow him or her where he or she is going or to turn away from him or her without looking back?

The learning part of this exercise is that each time I have done this with a group of mid-career or senior leaders, and we all have stood back and taken a look at our collective handiwork, we see a very interesting pattern. What does it reveal? The first impression is that it demonstrates that what experienced people look for in a leader does underscore at least some of the current leadership competencies of which most are aware--the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ). The most often named are vision, communications skill, decisiveness, and flexibility.

### The Main Thing

But second, with a deeper look, what people really are looking for in leaders falls much more into an arena that can only be referred to as character: humility, courage (moral and personal), caring, integrity, and perseverance, being the five themes that are identified consistently. This is what I continue to find as to why, primarily, people follow and trust their leaders, particularly in the crucibles of change or crisis.

Now I realize, these are not scientific findings, but, if anything, these repeated results are far more powerful in my estimation and in the estimation of those rising leaders with whom I work. These are the lessons of experience. So what does it tell us? Listen in on what might be called an "us and them" conversation that normally follows the exercise. In group after group this is what I hear about "lousy" leaders.

- "She talks a good game, but doesn't walk it."
- "He never listens to anyone. He thinks he knows everything."

- "In two years, I've never seen him come out of his throne room to talk to people except when there's a problem."
- "She will never accept responsibility for a screw up—especially publicly. It's always someone else's fault unless we have a success, then it's all her doing."
- "Things go into his office for a decision, but unless he knows his boss agrees, it just sits on the desk for months until there's a crisis. He just won't cross his boss even if it's the right thing to do."
- "I had hoped things would change around here, but even though our core values look nice on the wall, they've become a bad joke around here."

### **The Myth of Achilles' Heel**

For the discerning listener, these all have subtexts of the presence of pride--that ancient human flaw of hubris that felled Achilles and brought down Rome. If I am a good coach, my job is to ask some questions about now. Do you think that these senior leaders always acted in these ways? What causes these characteristics in leaders--DNA, bad parenting, or their education? What do you think makes the "great" leaders become great and the "lousy" leaders become lousy?

And now here is the one question hardest for many to really hear: How about you, what will make you different or the same when you are a senior leader? How will you avoid becoming like this and cultivate a character that others will want to follow?

I recognize that these are hard questions and perhaps in this era of "relativised" values and virtues they are even imponderable questions. But I am certain, based on all I have heard from public service leaders, that they are the most important questions to address for the development of future leaders (and, indeed, for the future of public service itself). They are even more critical than the kind of questions, as important and as long overdue as they are, that now are on the agenda: personnel grade and classification systems, executive pay compression, staffing processes, information architecture, human capital plans, performance measures, and de-layered structures that currently are being asked about human capital and leadership development.

And they are certainly more critical questions to address for future and present leaders than understanding how to craft a strategic plan, what the eight steps to organization change are, or how to distinguish an outcome from an output that are standard fare in leadership development programs.

### **Character and Failure**

Unfortunately, the question of character is most often raised in the wake of failure. National confidence in corporate executives has been shaken by the Enron, Arthur Andersen, and WorldCom failures. Questions have been raised about business ethics in disarray, as more revelations of other companies' malfeasance emerge almost daily. Leaders in the Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church and the United Way have had a blind eye in moral failures on their watch that has eroded trust in the social sector and the church. And, in the public sector the toleration of sexual predators by their failed leaders at the Air Force Academy, the presence of groupthink and truth suppression in both the Columbia and Challenger disasters, and the repeated public lies by senior officials that are associated with Vietnam, Watergate, and Monicagate--all these have contributed to the erosion of the trust placed in public servants as national leaders and in leaders in all sectors of the US. But these visible failures only are the harbingers of what is seen in small ways in many more organizations as the great-lousy exercise indicates.

Perhaps the good news is that maybe we can use this time of increased attention to human capital to do something to better prepare tomorrow's public service leaders than we are doing today. By placing the subject of character and power forthrightly back on the agenda of how we develop young people to become tomorrow's Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Harriet Tubman, George Marshall, and Jane Addams--to name a few who grow larger the closer we have looked across the years--we can get our focus on the main thing in leadership. All of these people we now revere came of age in a time when character was founded on some core truths and was part of the consciousness of culture beginning with teaching small children and carrying on into public life.

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### **Character Courses**

We want character but without unyielding conviction; we want strong morality but without the burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue but without the moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil... we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms we want it.

-James Davison Hunter in *The Death of Character*

Let us return then to Mr. Lincoln. How do you prepare leaders for the crucible of power that Lincoln warned of so that they become the "great" leaders--humble, courageous, caring, persevering, and with an evident sense of integrity? And, for our day, how do we overcome what has been described as the "death of character."

I don't yet know that answer, not entirely at least, but let me suggest briefly three character "courses"--in many ways lifelong courses--that I am finding in working with tomorrow's leaders that may help to avoid the trap that power has laid and to help prepare for the crucible of power. For if you listen to the stories of the great and lousy leaders that people have worked with, it is the subtle corrosion of the leader's character over time, beginning early on and intensifying as greater and greater power is assumed, that creates the Achilles heel of pride and arrogance, eroding the trust of followers. And what should be cause for all of us to pause: *no one is immune from this allure.*

**Course I.** Live with Purpose: The first course is what I would call the core character course. It has two facets: one is finding and then living out a guiding purpose, a life mission; the second facet is then placing a touchstone at the place of the core values and enduring beliefs--a place where you return to check yourself periodically. Some would call this a worldview, a telos.

For five years I taught a selected group of mid-career leaders in the Council for Excellence Fellows Program. Each year, the beginning point for these next generation leaders was to do something I was told is unusual for many of them--to take some time to pause and reflect over the course of a few days and even a few weeks in order to get clear about their life mission. What gets them out of bed every morning?

## Key Questions

Here are some questions that I find help in that exercise:

1. What would you want to hear people say about your life if you were able to listen in at your retirement dinner, your funeral? What would your kids say about you, or your spouse, your friends, and your enemies? What are the "blasphemies" that you would hate to hear people name as your typical behaviors and attitudes?
2. For what beliefs would you "bet your job" and resign your position?
3. What does a life of "success" look like for you at the end of the day? In all honesty--is success for you rank, proximity to a powerful person, money, relationships, service, or improved lives?
4. What is the one sentence epitaph that you would choose to sum up your life?

I then ask them to take all of that reflection and square it against their daily calendar and the feedback that a trusted few will be willing to give them along with their own honest self-examination. Then, finally, I ask them to address the question--What do you need to do to get clearer about your purpose and your core values and beliefs--and then live them out consistently for the next 40 years?

For busy people, it is not uncommon to find that they have never taken the time do this work--a lesson from my own life as well. One final note: this is an exercise that takes time, time marked by a calendar, not by a clock. A wise leader knows that this is not "soft" work; that, on the contrary, this reflection is the "hard" stuff that is at the center of shaping a good leader--one of character.

I have been told time and again by Fellows and other learners where I use this that so often they are too busy today and unaccustomed to reflection. The urgent drives out the important. Only a forced pause on a periodic basis such as the Fellows program requires plus some helpful feedback from a trusted few keeps them heading to that North Star. And that brings us to the importance of mentors.

**Course II.** Gain Wisdom from Mentors: The second character course is one that is most often 'taught' by a mentor or, better yet, by mentors--throughout life.

What I say normally to aspiring leaders is this. First, find someone who has the wisdom and the character that you would like to emulate--not a perfect person, but one that embodies many aspects of your own purpose and core values and is further down the road of life. There are no "methods" to this course; no set of steps or techniques. Do not read a book about mentoring. This is a simple act of a relationship with someone whom you can trust with your thoughts, your life purpose, and your heart--even your flaws. Spending time, parts of life together--walking, having a cup of coffee or a beer, sharing a meal--is the key to this character course.

A mentor most often is not someone in the chain of command. For example, someone recently retired from one's organization would be a place to start. That person has both the time and the generative impulse to give back to others. Also I recommend looking for mentors in places outside of work--at church, an older neighbor, or an older family member.

The agenda is yours, not theirs. So, use the time to ask questions about similar challenges and conflicts they have had. Delve into life issues as well as work issues as they are hardly separable. Draw out their stories in particular, as this will give you both context and a memorable learning mode.

## **For More Mature Senior Leaders**

For more mature senior leaders, here is something key to note. In countless conversations that I have had with mid-career leaders, there is the constant theme of a hunger for a good mentor. For those of you who are "elders at the gate," this is an opportunity to give back and to employ the things you have learned--often the hard way--by telling your stories; by spending good time with one or two people.

And one other thing, not all mentors need to be alive today. Find some of the teachers and mentors from our past that should be listened to again. Read the old books. Often in them you will find that there are similar situations from our past that were addressed by people who think differently than you and I do today. Yet human nature never really changes nor do the best and worst aspects of human behavior and the essential nature of good leadership character. Whatever you choose to do, go back and find what Washington and Jefferson read, what shaped Adams and Frederick Douglas, Lincoln and Lee. In the old books and the old stories, we find the wisdom of character that it seems people today still hunger for from older mentors.

**Course III.** Be Engaged in a Community of Practice: The third course is one that is experienced in a community of people where mutual learning, support, and even accountability occur and where mutual purposes are shared. Like the hunger for a good mentor, today's organizational and societal culture has left most people, not just public servants, with a "bowling alone" sense of the worlds they inhabit.

While extensive research over the last 30 years confirms in stark terms the significant loss of community that has characterized the American democracy, my work with mid-career and senior government leaders underscores this finding even more poignantly. Very common themes include not only the pressures of time, but of information overload, financial insistence, commuting, downsizing, and outsourcing. These factors and others all seem to contribute to this sense of "more with less" that today's public service leaders face. They describe a workplace where the urgent is constantly at the fore and the more important has to take a back seat. These factors contribute clearly to time pressures and choices that result in a sense of disconnection from families and others to a striking degree.

## **Mid-Career Leaders**

Despite whatever leadership topic is under discussion, I continue to be struck by how often mid-career leaders want to talk about the pressures they feel on their time that have them living an in-box life--at work and at home. Lack of balance is a subject that is raised time and again as the reason for not being able to stop and reflect, to learn, to build relationships with people.

What I have begun to realize as these conversations occur in leadership development programs is that this also is an opportunity to reexamine some things that we likely took for granted in earlier generations. By being a part of a community of people that choose to regularly spend time together, rising leaders will also find the tacit learning that helps to reinforce the lessons of character in the first two character courses. Here you are able to test ideas, learn from others' experiences, and gain the encouragement of heart to persist at the "long obedience in the same direction" that it takes to accomplish complex organization and public policy changes. It is here that values are passed on, that the culture is embedded, and where the very stuff of intellectual, emotional, social, and character capital is born.

## **Case Illustrations**

Let me cite two examples I often share with people as examples for them that seem to be working well--what many call communities of practice.

### **National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Academy Sharing Knowledge (ASK)**

The first is at NASA where they have begun something called the ASK. Essentially, this is a time-tested method of passing wisdom from one generation to another--telling stories. The idea is simple and would work well almost anywhere in government.

NASA, facing the loss of an entire generation of experienced project managers--its key leaders--began to embed their wisdom through the use of public storytelling forums and the publication of [ASK Magazine](#). It is within these forums and the conversations that ensue where younger, perhaps more technically advanced project managers can learn the wisdom and character traits that mature leaders have gained in both successes and failures--both of which are shared openly. They have found that there is something about telling a story that is not only remembered but changes people through tacit learning--it is almost experiential.

### **Council for Excellence in Government--Evenings on K Street**

A second example is in something that has begun at the [Council for Excellence in Government](#) where I have been a leadership coach. Each year approximately 150 Fellows are selected by their organizations for participation in a unique leadership development program at the mid-career point--GS-14 and GS-15 typically. Over the past dozen years or so almost 2,000 Senior Fellows ("graduates") are now advancing throughout the federal government. Many of these Senior Fellows continue to sense a need to continue as part of a community of leaders who share their experiences and continue to learn from each other. They are people who share a common purpose and a common set of values around public service leadership and seek to effect change where they are.

This past two years, the Council has sponsored a series of weekly [evening discussion forums](#) around a variety of current topics and issues that typically involves a short presentation, extensive time for discussion of the whole group, and then a time of informal networking by smaller groups and one on one conversations. A board of Senior Fellows volunteers its time to work with the Council to chart out how these leadership communities of practice can continue to be nurtured and grow within their home organizations. It is a creative means to reinforce the character qualities and leadership behaviors that often get extinguished once a person leaves any educational program and to continue to learn over a career.

### **Where Have All the Leaders Gone?**

There is a not-so-old saying that "people join organizations and leave supervisors." While this may be a vast oversimplification, it remains primarily true. With recent studies showing that one-third of federal employees are considering leaving public service, and with the conversations about leadership many of us have been involved in over the years, we can find ourselves asking a Bob Dylan-type question--Where have all the leaders gone?

My own experience with hundreds of senior executives and mid-career leaders in these past years has convinced me that the potential leaders are there. Many good people have been called to public service and many have the skills that are needed for today's leaders. But, as we tackle the sea change of the departure of a generation of senior leaders, I am convinced that the question of shaping character in future leaders is the central issue. The crucible of

power is one that continues to be the place where many have faltered. Lincoln saw it clearly and named it, beginning with himself. That is a good place for us all to start.

The question of character when power is assumed is one that needs to be at the fore of all succession and leader development efforts in public service. Helping people to forge a purpose and core values for life that are rooted in timeless, enduring principles; seeking out (and also becoming) mentors who will spend time to share their lives; forging communities of practice where public servants share a common purpose to continue to learn and to grow as leaders and as people of integrity--these are the places to begin working on building something that will last and leave behind a legacy of service.

Leaders grow leaders. More precisely, leaders of character grow other leaders of character who, in turn, do the same.

## **References**

*I am indebted to Dr. Steven Garber for his framework on the leadership crucible. He co-taught a "Leadership in the Crucible" seminar for Excellence in Government Fellows in 2002. His lifelong work preparing university students and his research on those who succeed at life has influenced this understanding as well as methods I have begun to use with effect in leadership development for mid-career and senior leaders in public service.*

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