

LEADING WITH PURPOSE

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Character: The One Leadership Advantage No One Can Take From You

After 40 years in the fire service, Chief Randy Bruegman founded The Leadership Crucible Foundation to reshape future leadership with a focus on fostering courage, empathy, and humility in leadership positions.

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“Why Who You Are Matters More Than What You Know”

Leadership reveals who we are long before it reveals what we know. The greatest advantage a leader possesses is not experience, intelligence, or position.

It is character.

When leadership fails, it is rarely because someone lacked knowledge. It is usually because they lacked character. I have faced more than one situation in my career where it would have been easier to look the other way. Two stand out clearly. In two separate organizations, a crew member marked themselves as responding to a call when they had not yet left the station. In one case, there was a four to five minute delay before the apparatus was actually enroute.



It would have been easy to address it quietly, minimize the significance, or convince myself it was not worth the disruption. But that is not what leaders of character do.

In our profession, response time is not simply a statistic. It represents trust. It represents the expectation a citizen places in us when they dial 911.

If we allow the standard to shift in small moments, we communicate that standards are flexible when they are inconvenient. This is how standards quietly begin to erode. What feels like a minor exception in the moment can gradually become the new expectation.

Culture is not defined by policy—it is defined by behavior.

Leaders of character understand that the small moments matter most. Culture is not defined by policy—it is defined by behavior. Over time, people watch those moments closely. When leaders hold the line, even when it is uncomfortable, they reinforce that the standard actually means something.

Addressing it directly came with resistance. There was significant pushback from some within the ranks and even from members of my leadership team after I demoted one of the responsible parties. In the other case, I gave the entire crew two days off without pay because no one stepped forward and was honest. It would have been far easier to protect comfort than to uphold the standard.

But that moment was never really about response time. It was about standards, trust, and whether the expectations we communicate are the expectations we are actually willing to enforce.

Character establishes the boundaries within which an organization operates, and those boundaries begin at the top.

Standards do not drift downward by accident. They drift when leadership permits them to.

Recently, as I was watching the news, I found myself reflecting on something that should concern all of us. Several elected officials, individuals entrusted to represent everyone, resorted to dropping F-bombs and using dismissive, inappropriate language toward those who simply disagreed with them. Regardless of where someone stands on the issue itself, that kind of rhetoric sends a message—and it is not the right one.

Young leaders are watching. Future public servants are watching. Our next generation is learning what leadership looks like by observing those currently in positions of authority. What they see modeled today will influence how they lead tomorrow.

Leadership is not about volume, theatrics, or diminishing those who hold a different view. It is about discipline, responsibility, and representing something larger than yourself. It is about understanding that the role carries weight and that words matter.

Moments like that remind us why character matters so much. Character is not a leadership accessory. It is the infrastructure.

You can develop skill, gain experience, and acquire authority. But without character, leadership eventually fractures.

Why Character Shapes Leadership Outcomes

If you pay attention across business, public safety, government, education, and nonprofit organizations, you will see a consistent pattern: leaders stepping down, organizations losing trust, cultures weakening, institutions facing credibility challenges. Most of these situations are not caused by a lack of intelligence or technical ability. Many of the individuals involved were capable and accomplished.

The issue was not competence.

It was character.





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Leadership failure is rarely about what leaders do not know. It is about who they are. Small compromises accumulate. A rationalization here. A shortcut there. A decision to avoid something uncomfortable. Over time, those moments compound until the consequences surface, sometimes quietly, sometimes publicly, but almost always predictably in hindsight.

We see this pattern in the political arena as well. It is not confined to one party or ideology. Incivility and performative outrage have become more normalized. Tone has shifted. Language has lowered. Winning the sound bite has, at times, replaced elevating the conversation.

If you have watched a House or Senate hearing on a critical issue, you may have noticed theatrics and one-upmanship that resemble

daytime television more than disciplined inquiry. Too often, spectacle overshadows substance. Performance replaces problem-solving.

This shift did not happen overnight. It happened gradually through repeated acceptance of conduct that once would have been considered beneath the responsibility of the office.

When standards shift, trust follows. Culture rarely declines in one dramatic moment. It changes gradually when behavior that once would have been unacceptable becomes normalized.

Outcomes are rarely separated from character. When leadership character is strong, organizations become more stable, resilient, and trusted. When character weakens, even strong institutions begin to fracture.

Character shapes leadership outcomes in practical ways. Accountability builds credibility. When leaders take responsibility, they strengthen trust. When they deflect blame, they weaken it.

Organizations can recover from mistakes.

What people struggle to recover from isn't the mistake itself, it's when leaders refuse to fully own it.

Ego distorts judgment when authority is not balanced by humility. Leaders who stop listening or isolate themselves from honest feedback often create preventable problems.

Humility is not weakness. It is protection.

Integrity rarely collapses in one dramatic moment. It erodes gradually.

A line crossed once becomes easier to cross again.

Avoidance compounds risk.

Difficult conversations postponed become larger problems later.

Standards decline.

Resentment builds.

Power does not change character.
It magnifies it.

Fairness and emotional discipline matter as well. Inconsistent standards and volatile reactions damage trust quickly. When people feel unsafe, communication weakens and performance soon follows. Power does not change character. It magnifies it.

Authority does not transform who a leader is. It simply makes their strengths and weaknesses more visible to everyone around them.

Leadership does not create character.

It exposes it.



Shared Sacrifice Builds Credibility

That is why examples of leaders sharing sacrifice during difficult periods matter. People watch closely to see whether leaders are willing to carry the burden with them..

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Gravity Payments CEO Dan Price announced he would forgo his own salary to help avoid layoffs and support employees during economic uncertainty. Because the company was privately held and mid-sized, the decision felt tangible and personal to employees. It reinforced a culture of shared responsibility rather than top-down directives.

More recently, similar signals have appeared in other sectors. In 2025, GoPro founder and CEO Nicholas Woodman voluntarily waived his base salary as the company worked through financial challenges and restructuring. The decision alone could not solve the company's financial pressures, but it communicated something important, that leadership was willing to absorb part of the burden alongside the organization.

Similar behaviors have appeared across healthcare systems, universities, and non-profit organizations when executives voluntarily reduce compensation to preserve jobs. In environments where margins are thin and missions are personal, those decisions carry significant meaning.

People watch closely to see whether leaders are willing to carry the burden with them.

What makes these situations resonate is not the dollar amount, it is the signal they send.



It is the signal. When leaders ask others to absorb hardship while protecting themselves, trust declines. When leaders share the burden, credibility increases.

Shared sacrifice communicates alignment, and alignment is one of the strongest foundations of trust.

Shared sacrifice is not about money alone. It is about responsibility. It is about fairness. It is about leaders demonstrating that they are part of the same team they are asking others to support. Shared sacrifice is not a strategy. It is a reflection of character.

Why Who You Are Matters More Than What You Know

Over the years, I have noticed something that becomes clearer the longer you lead. Leadership conversations often center around strategy, performance, and results. Those things matter. They always have.

But the longer I have led, and the more leaders I have had the privilege to work with, the more I have come to understand something deeper.

Skills matter. Experience matters. Knowledge matters. But character matters most. Skills may open the door. Results may sustain momentum. But character determines whether people trust you once you arrive.

Competence may earn authority. Character earns followership and respect. At the end of a leadership journey, people rarely remember budgets or strategic plans. They remember how they were treated.

There is someone you once led who still thinks about you, not because of your title, but because of how you handled a moment that mattered.

You fall to the level of your character.

Titles fade. Character does not. Leadership is revealed when doing the right thing becomes difficult. In those moments, you do not rise to the level of your intentions. Under pressure, you fall to the level of your character.

The one leadership advantage no one can give you, and no one can take from you, is who you choose to be.

And ask yourself this:

When people walk away from an interaction with you, what do they carry with them — trust, clarity, confidence, or something else entirely?



Final Thought

Leadership will test your skill.

Pressure will test your judgment.

Time will test your character.

You may impress people with results for a season. You may gain recognition for strategy or performance. But over the course of a career, and certainly over the course of a life, what endures is who you were when it mattered.

Character is not formed in the spotlight.

It is revealed there.

It is built in the quiet decisions, the disciplined choices, and the moments when doing the

right thing would have been easier to avoid.

Leadership eventually strips away the noise of titles, recognition, and position.

When the assignment changes and the title fades, one thing remains.

Who you chose to be.

Lead in a way that reflects that reality.

“Character is not proven when decisions are easy.

It is revealed when doing the right thing costs you something.”

— Chief B

Chief B’s Key Leadership Takeaways

- Character is not optional in leadership. It is foundational.
- Small compromises accumulate long before consequences appear.
- Power magnifies character—it does not create it.
- Shared sacrifice strengthens credibility and trust.
- Competence may open doors, but character determines who stays with you.
- Leadership is remembered less for results and more for how people were treated.

Recommended Reading

If you’re looking to go deeper into the themes of leadership, culture, engagement, and organizational health, here are five powerful books that align closely with the challenges and opportunities we explored this month:

The Speed of Trust – Stephen M. R. Covey

Dare to Lead – Brené Brown

The Advantage – Patrick Lencioni

Extreme Ownership – Jocko Willink and Leif Babin

Leadership and Self-Deception – The Arbinger Institute

The Trusted Advisor – David H. Maister