

VOL

Voice of Leadership

www.proleadership.org
Email: info@proleadership.org
Tel: 301-890-4081
Fax: 301-890-6787



Volume 2 | Issue 1

March, 2014

Leadership Under Adversity

By Robert Brown Jr.

PRO Leadership: What are some prime examples of leadership in your opinion?

Rob: There are a variety of prime examples of leadership that I could choose from. I will start with what's closest to me right now – my family. I see my father in his leadership role in my family, as well as the leadership role that my mother has taken. In my community, I see my pastor in his leadership role as the shepherd of our congregation. I see business colleagues who have taken leadership roles in different endeavors to move themselves and their respective businesses forward. An obvious choice are political leaders who are elected by our nation's registered voters. I also think that a prime example of leadership is demonstrated by those who take controversial and courageous stands on matters that are passionate to them, whether those stands be wildly popular or fiercely unpopular. Let's not forget the up and coming leaders in schools who demonstrate leadership through high achievement in their grades and their motivation in undertaking rigorous courses of study while participating in extracurricular activities as well.

PRO Leadership: What separates leadership under adversity from mere leadership?

Rob: To properly answer this question, I think it's important to begin with definitions of both leadership and adversity. Leadership, simply put, is the combination of the actions, functions, positions and influence that a person has over the other members of a group to achieve a common goal or purpose. Adversity, by definition, is a set of conditions that are contrary and detrimental to a person or organization's well-being. Now what separates them? What separates them is that leadership under adversity poses a unique set of challenges and obstacles for that particular leader to overcome that mere leadership rarely poses. Let's use an example to further explain the difference between the two. Let's suppose a man is elected to be the chairperson of a charitable organization whose mission is to assist in environmental awareness and wildlife preservation. Let's also suppose that during their 4 year term, it's relatively business as usual. Then, when their successor takes office 4 years later, the IRS makes changes to



the Internal Revenue Code making it much harder to raise funds for charitable organizations and thus threatens the very existence of this particular charity. The new chairperson is faced with a set of unfavorable circumstances upon which she must demonstrate a set of characteristics her predecessor never had to in order to maintain the wherewithal and effectiveness of the organization. Her predecessor may have acted more as a caretaker of the organization. While his duties were important, he didn't have to deal with

Leadership Under Adversity Cont...

the adversity that his successor does, whose role has drastically changed almost to that of a crisis manager, requiring a whole different set of strengths and skills to keep the organization viable and true to its mission.

PRO Leadership: In your opinion, can a leader who has never faced adversity truly be considered a leader?

Rob: Absolutely. I don't think that it's a prerequisite for a leader to have to face adversity to be truly considered a leader. Although I think that adversity can make a leader a better leader, I don't think that adversity is a prerequisite per se. I don't think a leader who has never faced adversity in his or her position should be penalized or disqualified as not being a true leader simply because they did not have to face adversity "on their watch," so to speak. More often than not these things are out of their control. Nor do I think a leader should manufacture or encourage adversity to justify or solidify their position as a leader to legitimize their position of authority during that time.

PRO Leadership: What is it about adversity that makes a leader a better leader?

Rob: I think that adversity helps leaders exercise a set of intellectual and emotional muscles that they otherwise would not even know were there had the adversity never taken place. It's just like exercising. If one sits on the couch and watches TV all day long, they're not really improving their personal fitness. However, if they voluntarily go to the gym to exercise, they're facing the adversity of lifting heavy weights and doing cardiovascular exercises which taxes their muscles and respiratory system. In the end, after repeated sessions, they're going to be much stronger and able to run farther than they would have been had they stayed on the couch in front of the TV. Now in your book *Redefining Leadership*, you discuss a very tense situation in 1998 when you were the President of the AAU Student

Union in the midst of the Ethio-Eritrean Border Conflict. The adversity you faced when taking sides during this conflict and confronting non-cooperative Eritrean student leaders made you a better leader I dare say. It probably taught you how to communicate and negotiate better under very tense circumstances when the information at hand was not that clear. Those adverse circumstances transformed you from a good student leader to a great student leader.

PRO Leadership: You mentioned my first book and how the experience during the Ethio-Eritrean war taught me many lessons. Recently, I published my second book called *The 9 Cardinal Building Blocks for continued success in leadership*. One of the 9 cardinal building blocks is Persistence. And I wrote in details about how overcoming challenges and continual setbacks shape our personality and character. As leaders we should embrace persistence as we face challenges and use the opportunities to grow and become better leaders.

PRO Leadership: If adversity makes one a better leader, should leaders wish to face adversity in their positions of leadership? Why or why not?

Rob: I think that's a question that only that particular leader in that particular leadership position at that particular point of time can answer for themselves. Wishing for adversity – wishing for a crisis or a tragedy to occur for the sole purpose of becoming a better leader can probably be considered somewhat cruel or masochistic, so my initial response is to say 'no' they should NOT wish for adversity. However, they should take all appropriate steps to make sure they have the courage internally and the resources externally to be prepared for whatever potential adversity they can reasonably foresee in that position of leadership.

PRO Leadership: Do you consider yourself a leader who has faced adversity before?

Rob: To call myself a leader I think would be something that I would tend to let someone else decide. I am a lawyer, business owner, I have held leadership positions in organizations and have led at certain times in my life, absolutely. But when it comes to whether I am a leader, I would leave that question to family, friends and colleague around me who are in a better position to answer. As for adversity, yes – I've faced adversity many, many times, from having been downsized unceremoniously from former jobs to not having passed the bar exam on my first try. I think we all face adversity at some point in our lives – it's how we approach the adversity and how we respond to it which determines what trajectory we are plotting our life's course on.

PRO Leadership: I totally agree with you that we all face adversity. Especially, it is important to know that leaders who never faced adversities don't have authenticity to lead and without scars you cannot proof that you have been around the block and leading. In my book, I talked about the importance of harvesting stories. And if we don't boldly face challenges and outgrow setbacks, we cannot harvest stories and we don't have testimonials. And leaders can only inspire and touch the heart of their people if they have great stories and testimonials.

You may listen the Podcast version from iTunes:
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/leadership-under-adversity/id834752776>

Leadership Under Adversity Cont...

You may subscribe to receive our podcasts as soon as they're uploaded:
<http://feeds.feedburner.com/PROLeadershipVOLPodcast>

PRO Leadership: Can you give our listeners some examples of leaders who have faced adversity before and failed?

Rob: I think one of the first examples of failed leadership in the face of adversity was former FEMA Director Michael Brown's response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and how ill-prepared his agency was in dealing with that horrible natural disaster. The response time in saving lives, providing shelter and delivering much needed food, medical supplies and other necessities to the residents of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina was abhorrent and inexcusable. Although this may be a stretch, to me another example of failed leadership in the face of adversity took place in the sports arena – Lance Armstrong. This was a guy who was at one time considered the best athlete in the world. What was his adversity? It was the constant inquiries by the press and rival athletes that he had used performance enhancing drugs to lead his race team to 7 Tour de France victories. His failure was not only cheating by taking performance enhancing drugs to achieve those victories but vociferously denying any wrongdoing for years and years and then threatening to ruin the careers of those in the cycling world who would dare to out him. There are perhaps countless others but those are the ones that come to mind immediately.

PRO Leadership: You brought a very relevant story. In my book *The 9 Cardinal Building Blocks*, I narrated the stories of three great leaders who failed the test of

character. I am not here judging anyone and I am not definitely appearing perfect. Besides, I am not comparing myself with these great leaders. We all are on the learning curve and my goal is to identify the lessons, as you said, we should learn from their stories. These leaders are Lance Armstrong, Tiger Woods, and General David Petraeus. When these leaders failed to respect universal values, they paid great prices. What is interesting about these leaders is that they are heroes and millions of people admire and respect them for their heroism. In the case of Armstrong, he had beat cancer but couldn't persist and overcome the temptation of using drugs and that led him to break one of the rules of Tour de France. Because of that he was banned for life and stripped of all 7 Tour de France Titles. That is unfortunate.

PRO Leadership: What lessons can we learn from the failures of those leaders who faced adversity?

Rob: I think we can learn from those failures that nothing – NOTHING – is more important for a leader to accomplish than being prepared for any conceivable adversity that can come their way during their leadership tenure. If a person is leading a group or organization, they must learn to communicate their vision to their subordinates that in order for their share mission or purpose to be successful. They must be prepared for emergencies and crises by knowing what resources they have at their disposal and fostering strong alliances and relationships to depend upon in times of distress. We can also learn from these failures that in order for a leader to be successful in times of adversity, they must always operate with integrity. This serves to help that leader solidify the necessary support from those inside AND outside the organization in order to successfully steward that group or organization through the adversity to come out even

stronger in the end.

PRO Leadership: What should a leader do when they are in the midst of facing adversity and feel as if though they are failing?

Rob: I think it's a three step process. They should first stop and re-evaluate the situation. What about the situation is detrimental to them and to the group? What has gone right that they can use to their advantage? Second, I think that leader should seek wise counsel from those whom they trust and have knowledge of the situation. They should ingest a variety of different opinions from these people – from those who may agree with them and the steps that they've taken to those who do NOT agree with them. It's important to view the adversity and the approach to dealing with the adversity from many angles. Thirdly, I think that they should take the opinions of those knowledgeable parties they respect coupled with the empirical data available to them to take whatever steps they deem necessary in order to change course and redirect their actions away from what failing actions they were undertaking.

PRO Leadership: What can people who aspire to become leaders in their organizations, churches, communities, and governments do right now to prepare themselves for the adversity they may face in future leadership positions?

Rob: I think one of the most effective ways they can prepare to deal with adversity in future leadership position is to evaluate how they themselves have successfully dealt with adversity in the past when they were NOT in a position of leadership. What steps did they take? What worked? What didn't? What did they wish they had done differently? Once they have a clear picture of how they successfully (or unsuccessfully)

Leadership Under Adversity Cont...

navigated those adverse situations, jot those strategies down in a journal for future use. Another way is to view and study leaders who have successfully navigated their groups and organizations through adversity. What did those leaders do right? What mistakes did they make? What could those leaders have done differently to negotiate and overcome that adversity even quicker? I mentioned before and it's worth repeating – preparation is key in dealing with adversity for those who currently are leaders and those who aspire to be.

Robert Brown is a native of the Washington, DC metropolitan area and a member of the District of Columbia Bar since 2002. A proud Michigan State Spartan alumnus, Rob has worked in the fields of complex litigation, civil rights class action, bankruptcy, workers' compensation, patent litigation, mergers/acquisitions, SEC investigations and Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) investigations. He is also licensed to practice before the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Rob is currently a financial services representative, owner of The Writer's Silo and co-host of Between the Covers.

Contribute

Toward the upcoming three VoL themes:

1. Visionary Leadership, Deadline April 22, 2014
2. The Place of Growth and Learning in Leadership, Deadline July 22, 2014
3. Leading Change, Deadline October 22, 2014

You can contribute:

- Article,
- Story/quote/anecdote,
- Tips for leaders &
- Interview...

For more info, visit the Magazine/ Podcast page from our website.