

Exceptional Leadership: Allow Positive Psychology to Show you the Way

By Johnny Parker

The recent events of the Atlanta Falcon's star quarterback Michael Vick are a strong reminder of just how essential character is to leadership. Vick is allegedly guilty of promoting/sponsoring dog fighting, along with general cruelty to animals. He has been indicted by the federal government. Anyone who knows football would not question Vick's talent as a quarterback. Some consider him the most gifted athlete in the history of Atlanta sports, while others see him as the most polarizing. Certainly, Vick is an example of how talent alone is not sufficient for a leader who does not have the character to match. What is true of Michael Vick as the leader of his team is true of leaders in other organizations. How many times have we witnessed talented and bright leaders fizzle out because they did not have the internal fortitude to sustain their momentum?

Moral failure is a matter of the heart. In essence, the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. This article is about the heart of the leader. When I say "heart" I am referring to our internal headquarters, the deepest part of who we are, the real you and the real me. This article is intended to urge you, as a leader, to be intentional about integrating the virtues of Positive Psychology into your life. Positive Psychology is a relatively new term for a life approach that focuses on healthy mindedness. If leaders are deliberate about incorporating the ideas of Positive Psychology into their lives, it will spill over into their leadership style and into their relationships with others. What a leader is *internally* impacts everything they do *externally*. The Proverbs teach us to

“Guard (our) heart with all diligence for out of it flow the issues of life.”¹ Leadership happens from the inside-out. Consequently, protection from moral failure becomes the byproduct of embracing the virtues that Positive Psychology espouses.

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive Psychology is an emerging field within the broader discipline of psychology. Historically, this discipline has emphasized pathology, healing and a disease model of human functioning. Positive Psychology focuses on human strengths and wellness. It explores those factors which promote thriving amongst individuals, communities and societies. It is the difference between mental illness and mental wellness. Here is a sampling of definitions by authorities and leaders in the *Positive Psychology* movement:

- *Positive Psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions.*²
- *Positive Psychology is about scientifically informed perspectives on what makes life worth living. It focuses on aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness, fulfillment, and flourishing.*³

Prior to World War II, psychology focused both on curing mental illness and on fostering healthy, meaningful lives for people. Mental wellness, beyond merely addressing mental illness, was the norm for most psychologists. Listen to the words of Abraham Maslow: “*The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side. It has revealed to us much about man’s shortcomings, his illness, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable*

¹ Proverbs 4:23 NIV (New International Version)

² Shelly Gable and Jonathan Haidt. “What (and Why) Is Positive Psychology?” *Review of General Psychology* 9 (2005): 103-110.

³ *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2005.

*aspirations, or his hull psychological height. It as if psychology has voluntarily restricted itself to only half of its rightful jurisdiction, and that, the darker, meaner half.”*⁴

Following the war, a great majority of psychologists found employment through the Veterans Administration by treating soldiers suffering from mental illness. This caused a dramatic shift in the focus of psychology, with any focus on mental wellness becoming quite rare. In the last ten years, there has been a return to the brand of psychology that William James advocated -- a psychology that emphasizes human strengths and healthy mindedness.

What is leadership?

Leadership is about relationships. It places a premium on the human equation. True leaders know this. They describe leadership in different ways, but they are really saying the same thing. Winston and Patterson describe leadership as “*one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the follower to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission.*”⁵ John Maxwell defines leadership as influence: a leader influences people to perform to the best of their ability.⁶ Max Dupree says leadership is similar to a jazz band. The leader facilitates the choosing of the music, picking the right musicians and encouraging each person to perform as a group.⁷ Although there may be

⁴ Maslow, Abraham. *Motivation and Personality*. (New York: Harper, 1954), 354.

⁵ Winston and Patterson, *International Journal of Leadership Studies, Volume 1, Issue 2, (2006) 2*.

⁶ Maxwell, John, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998).

⁷ DePree, Max. *Leadership Jazz*. (New York: Dell, 1992.)

subtle differences in the definitions, the common thread is that people and relationships are at the core of leadership.

The prophet Daniel was a leader who possessed traits described as exceptional. His unique character led to his success. In Daniel 6:3 it says, “Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his *exceptional* (emphasis mine) qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.”⁸ The word exceptional is an inspiring word. It means rare and uncommon. I like the way Dr. Palmer Parker defines a leader. He says, “A leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to project on other people his or her shadow, or his or her light...a leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what’s going on inside him or her self, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good.”⁹

Kouzes and Posner reinforce this idea of leadership from the inside out, “It’s about leading out of what is already in your soul. It’s about liberating the leader within you.”¹⁰ It is not about employing the latest leadership fad or technique. Rather, true leadership is leading from the soul. It is allowing what is in you to shape and influence others.

Merging Positive Psychology and Leadership

Leadership involves the human equation and Positive Psychology emphasizes optimal human functioning. Successful leaders can maximize their effectiveness by understanding and embracing, to a large degree, the components of Positive Psychology.

⁸ Dan. 6:3 NIV.

⁹ Palmer Parker, *Leading from Within – Reflections on Spirituality and Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Potter’s House Books, 1990) 7.

¹⁰ Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner. *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2002) 381.

Dr. Stephen Covey researched how the United States defined success from the period of 1776 until World War II and discovered that success was based on issues of character, internal qualities like honesty, diligence and loyalty.¹¹ What a person was in their heart, the actual core of their character, counted. Following World War II, our culture began to base success on externals such as image and appearance. Covey says, “Success became more a function of personality, of public image, of attitudes and behaviors, skills and techniques that lubricate the processes of human interaction.”¹² For leaders to know how to cultivate an environment for maximizing relationships and optimizing performance in an organization, the past is a worthy example. Effective leadership begins at the heart level.

Chip Bell, author of Managers as Mentors, says, “Learning that is not anchored to the heart is not retained.”¹³ Learning that touches the heart is what’s remembered. Positive Psychology touches the heart and what a leader is in their heart has powerful implications for followers. As a leader does their own “work of heart” they are able to positively influence followers and simultaneously shape their organizations. Many leadership programs emphasize the development of arranging the external world and gaining mastery of certain skills while the matters of relationship and the heart are thought of as “touchy feely” or “soft.” Building *both* skill sets is an approach that will gain greater growth and eventual success for the leader.

Nelson Mandela is an example of someone that allowed his jail cell to shape his heart for leadership. Certainly, during his 30 years of imprisonment, Mandela wrestled

¹¹ Covey, Stephen. *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

¹² Ibid

¹³ Chip Bell, *Managers as Mentors* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett –Koehler, 2002) 13.

with dark moments. However, somewhere along the way, he deeply embraced virtues such as forgiveness and humility that allowed him to emerge with the *heart strength* to eventually lead his country.

Cultivating the virtues of Positive Psychology in one's leadership takes diligence and plain old hard work. Proverbs 10:4 references this: "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth."¹⁴ It is far easier to focus on the outer world and externalize everything. Being led by selfishness and playing the game of manipulation in an organization is often times easier than dealing with our hearts.

Why should you, as a leader, embrace Positive Psychology? The bottom line is that you cannot run from your heart. In fact, you can live more deeply by living through and from your heart. You have the chance for your heart/life to flourish as well as those around you (followers) to flourish and to come alive with passion. Philosopher Howard Thurman says, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive. What the world needs are people who have come alive."¹⁵ Positive Psychology has outlined six virtues and 24 character strengths that have strong implications for exceptional leadership. Owning and cultivating these tenets in your life will enable your heart to come alive.

- **Wisdom and Knowledge:** Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective).
- **Courage:** Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal (bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality).
- **Humanity:** Interpersonal strengths that involve "tending and befriending" others (love, kindness, social intelligence).

¹⁴ Proverbs 10:4 NIV.

¹⁵ www.thinkexist.com/quotes/howard_thurman/

- Justice: Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life (citizenship, fairness, leadership).
- Temperance: Strengths that protect against excess (forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, self-regulation).
- Transcendence: Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality).¹⁶

Think of these six virtues as streams and then listen to the Psalmist David as he describes the blessed or happy person as a “...tree planted by the streams of living water and bringing forth fruit in their season.”¹⁷ Imagine if leaders were intentional about inculcating these six streams into their life and leadership, the impact this would have upon followers and organizations! Explore each of these six streams and the difference they can make in your leadership. You have the opportunity to become the change you wish to see in others.

1. Wisdom and Knowledge

Do you, as a leader, promote an environment where creativity, curiosity and open-mindedness are valued? A survey of senior managers in companies across North America, Europe and Japan, conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit showed that credible and accessible leadership are number one and two regarding motivating and retaining employees. Number three on the list was innovation. The survey indicated that leaders who are innovators attract, engage and retain followers.¹⁸ Employees experience a sense of passion and vigor in this setting.

¹⁶ Christopher Peterson and others, “Greater Strengths of Character and Recovery from Illness.” *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, Volume 1, Issue 1, (January 2006).

¹⁷ Psalm 1:3 NIV.

¹⁸ Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner. *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2002).

2. Courage

How does a leader integrate courage into their life and leadership? Leaders require courage to have critical conversations with followers. Leaders will have to address issues of conflict. The wise and proactive leader purposes to have a conflict effectiveness plan. Leaders need courage to make unpopular decisions.

3. Humanity

People in the workplace who perform beyond expectations are usually inspired by love from the leader.¹⁹ Love is the most powerful force in the universe. Leaders who take the time to listen, to support and affirm, communicate love. Employees who are loved feel alive, significant, valued and respected. Employees tend to reciprocate with love with enhanced performance. Erich Fromm captures the essence of this idea: *“To love means to commit oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely in the hope that our love will produce love in the loved person. Love is an act of faith, and whoever is of little faith is also of little love.”*²⁰

4. Justice

Justice brings balance to love and humanity. Followers are loved yet they are held accountable. It is important to note that this accountability is not rooted in fear of punishment. As leaders practice equality and convey trust toward all employees, employees are able to take ownership of their work. Employees are afforded choices and this builds commitment. Not wanting to let the rest of the group down motivates people to do their part. The word “they” (pertaining to leadership) gets removed from the vocabulary of employees.

¹⁹ Bruce Winston, *Be a Leader for God's Sake* (Virginia Beach, VA: SLS Regent University Press, 2002).

²⁰ Ibid.

5. Temperance

In Good to Great, author Jim Collins describes five levels of leadership, with the most effective leader, termed Level 5, marked with the duality of humility and strong will.

Collins states, “*Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious – but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves.*”²¹

When a leader lacks humility, he serves his own interests and not the interests of the team or organization. Further, these leaders usually have a tendency to micromanage others, struggling to trust and share power. Because trust is minimized, these leaders become highly controlling and ideas or creativity are rarely encouraged. They may perceive themselves as indispensable and sometimes also lack integrity. It is extremely difficult to own responsibility and to admit wrong when humility is not present.

6. Transcendence

Play and fun are one of the ways a leader can bring a sense of transcendence to work. Researchers have found that play and laughter can reduce stress and stimulate people toward creativity. Further, research validates the link between laughter, leadership and employee success. In their study with the U.S. military, Priest and Swain concluded the following, “*The results confirm our hypothesis: leaders who were deemed “good” in the eyes of their followers did have a significantly higher overall humor rating than those leaders who were deemed “bad” ... We should note that good leaders have a warmer style of humorous conduct than do bad leaders. One would find these findings all that*

²¹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) 21.

more profound, given that the emphasis in the military on conformity to order, hierarchy and function would seem to be antagonistic to humor.”²²

Humor inspires and lifts the mood in a positive way that enhances creativity and innovation. A leader who takes time not only to notice the accomplishment of employees but also praise that accomplishment fosters an optimistic environment. Also, reflecting and celebrating team achievements reinforces high morale. If God sets aside time to reflect on the beauty of his work (Genesis 1:31) shouldn't we, as leaders, do the same?

Leading With Virtue

Does living out these virtues sound a bit daunting? Does it feel like you are called to be super-leader, ala Superman? Indeed, cultivating these virtues is a lifestyle. Elaine Fortier, Vice President of Human Resources at New Focus, which develops innovative fiber-optic products, says “Most of my business philosophy really comes from my whole life philosophy -- call it a set of values or a belief system, a philosophical approach, a spiritual approach, a construct.”²³ This has to be the desire of your heart. As a leader, you have to want to live this way for yourself and not simply because it makes good business sense. People will be able to see that you're disingenuous...if, in fact, you are. Lance Secretan said, “Leadership is something you live, model and practice, not something you tell other people to do.”²⁴ This is a call to look at your life and your leadership in a deeper way. Jazz horn player, Charlie Parker summed it up well, “If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn.”²⁵

²² Robert Priest and Jordan Swain, *Humor and Its Implications for Leadership Effectiveness* (2002), 177

²³ Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner. *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2002) 184.

²⁴ Lance Secretan, “The Essence of Leadership,” *Spirituality & Health Magazine*, July/August 2006.

²⁵ www.saxophone.org/tomint.

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