

## leadership instalments

# The Case for Self-Restraint

By Dan Gaynor

### CHARACTER AND LEADERSHIP ARE INSEPARABLE.

**CHARACTER IS THE** foundation upon which great leaders build successful careers. Without it, no book, course or teacher will be helpful. Character shapes leadership; it determines how leaders express the skills they acquire. I think Abraham Lincoln must have understood this when he commented, "If you want to test a man's character, give him power." Power reveals character most clearly. The way leaders use power is a defining mark.

Because all leaders exercise power, self-restraint is among the most important characteristics. Author Erwin McManus offered an important observation when he wrote, "Power is only a tool. It gives us the freedom to be who we really are." Power is an important leadership tool. Without it, leaders can't make many of the changes that are necessary to help teams reach their potential, and it does bring freedom. In a workplace setting, when we are in a subordinate role we must be at least somewhat careful about what we say and do - we need to keep the groceries coming and the mortgage paid - but when we move into a leadership role these restraints largely fall away. We are freed of them.

This is why it is difficult to judge someone's character when you are in the leadership role - people are careful about what they say and do around you. To know what subordinate leaders are really all about you have to ask the people who work for them. I've worked with my share of leaders who were professional and courteous around me, and bullies or control freaks with their subordinates.

Now let's return to the case for self restraint. The most pressing need for it comes in the way leaders manage anger. I worked closely for a time with one who often asked his employees what they thought and how things were going. Virtually every member of that team told me about making the mistake of answering him truthfully with some unwelcome news. He responded in loud and angry outbursts, often in front of others. He could also be a very caring leader but this troublesome habit became characteristic of his relationship with employees. They learned to respond in one of two ways: first they tried to avoid him, and when cornered, they simply told him what they thought he wanted to hear. His lack of self restraint created a culture of fear in which he was often misled by the people who worked for him. His outbursts discouraged people for days if not weeks.

To be sure, there are times when it is right to be angry; when someone does something dishonest or hurtful, or blatantly



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disregards corporate values, it is right to express anger. Anger here is justified and drives home the point that some acts are unacceptable, but anger simply because others spoke truthfully with good intentions is wrong and it is damaging, yet I see it all the time. Many leaders don't meet the test of receiving power very well. Paralyzing fear spreads as turnover climbs and performance drops.

Self restraint is a moral obligation for all leaders that has powerful practical consequences - practice it and you will enter the small circle of men and women who use power with integrity to build strong satisfying teams.

Discussion questions:

1. How did you react the last time a situation at work made you angry?
2. Beyond anger, what other leadership situations demand self-restraint?
3. What practical steps can you take to avoid the pitfalls of reacting to situations poorly?

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