

**2011 VIRTUAL CONFERENCE  
ON MORAL LEADERSHIP:**  
*The Classic Virtues in Organizational Leadership*

**Temperance and Organizational Leadership: Control  
Yourself before Trying to Control Others**

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Written to explore the moral dimensions of organizational leadership, this article will specifically address the classical virtue of temperance and its relevance for leaders. In addition to explaining what temperance is and how it is demonstrated through leadership, particular attention will be given to why it is an important character trait for contemporary leaders to develop. To more sufficiently articulate this point, a detailed example of a temperate leader will be provided.

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*“You can’t run the country if you can’t run yourself.”  
- Lady Bird Johnson (Dec. 22, 1912 – Jul. 11, 2007)*

**B**rown, Treviño and Harrison (2005) define ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (p. 120). The appropriate conduct demonstrated by ethical leaders involves the expression of certain specific character traits. “The conceptualization of ethical leadership behavior... does not encompass all aspects of virtue but is consistent with aspects of character virtues such as love, faithfulness, temperance, and justice” (Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts & Chonko, 2009, p. 159). Of these four virtues, this paper will specifically address the application of temperance to organization leadership.

*Miriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (1996) defines the term temperance as a “moderation in action, thought, or feeling: restraint.” But in leadership, the virtue goes much deeper than just moderation. According to Wiersbe (1989), temperance is the “exercise [of] sober, sensible judgment in all things.” This definition is more appropriate to explain how temperance is exhibited by ethical leaders.

**Why is Temperance Important for Leaders?**

Ethical leaders “realize that, like it or not, their credibility, internal belief system, consistency, level of self-motivation and confidence, cannot be prevented from affecting others, rippling out

messages throughout the company” (Pater, 2011, p. 26). For this reason, leaders must be level-headed and self-disciplined in their interactions with equals, supervisors, and subordinates. Their decisions also must be based on facts and sound reasoning rather than on emotions or personal opinions. Otherwise their rash words or actions could have far-reaching negative consequences, both inside and outside of their organization.

“Leaders need to step back and give serious attention to their own process of spiritual transformation before trying to lead others... the best thing any of us... have to bring to leadership is our own transforming selves” (Barton, 2009, p. 28). While this particular article was written for church leaders, the same principles apply to leaders in other organizations, as well. If leaders lack the ability to control themselves and their emotions and do not know how to lead from a position of maturity, their leadership will be ineffectual. A leader who reacts negatively to difficult situations or who flies off the handle at the first sign of trouble will be unable to positively impact followers or the organization as a whole. Possessing temperance, on the other hand, allows leaders to take that required step backwards and examine themselves and their leadership rather than allowing their pride or self-serving emotions to get in the way of making rational decisions.

“As human beings, we are works in progress. Our life experiences and willingness to develop ourselves and others forge our character over time. In order to grow as more virtuous leaders, we need to develop the character strengths associated with temperance” (Sosik, 2006, p. 147). No human being, and certainly no leader, is perfect or without flaw. To varying degrees, everyone makes mistakes. It is important for leaders to remember that they are not infallible and that everything does not center on them. According to Riggio, “Temperate leaders have a humility that distinguishes the very best leaders” (para. 4). In organizational leaders, temperance means putting aside personal ambition, pride, and vanity, and maintaining control of their emotions. It is through the development of temperance that leaders learn to hold themselves accountable for their actions, and not only admit their mistakes, but also strive to correct them and learn from them (Lindell, 2009, para. 2).

According to Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Lee-Davies, L. (2007), one of the temptations which can bring about a leader’s downfall is to allow emotions to “override critical rationality” (p. 201). Green (n.d.) said, “Effective leaders understand the consequences of self-gratification. However, bad leaders don’t. They focus on getting the right organizational structure in place but never evaluate their inadequacies” (para. 2). When leaders lack a proper amount of temperance, they are not properly self-aware and can easily succumb to “excessive greed, sexual appetites, lack of self-control, etc” (Riggio, 2011, para. 4) by allowing emotions or personal desires, rather than the application of prudence or logic, to influence their decision-making process.

Everyone, including leaders, or perhaps especially leaders, must deal with difficulties, frustrations and disappointments, sometimes on a fairly regular basis. Problems arise when small disappointments create “bigger problems that can produce a great deal of damage. Besides big disappointments... we can become just as upset or frustrated by a series of minor annoyances” (Meyer, 2004, p. 215). To further complicate matters, on many occasions leaders must handle occurrences which involve not only complex or upsetting situations, but also the need to interact with people who hold opposing positions. Part of practicing temperance involves the art of diplomacy, or “the ability to manage delicate situations, especially involving people from different cultures, and certainly from differing opinions... to reconcile opposing viewpoints without giving offense or compromising principle” (Sanders, 1994, p. 73). Expecting thorny

situations to never occur would be unrealistic; It is not simply avoiding difficulties that matters, but rather being prepared to navigate them properly. “In handling or overcoming stress, it is important to recognize it for what it is, learn how to control it, and make it work for us rather than against us” (Meyer, p. 11). A temperate leader does not over-react when things fail to go according to plan, or when plans are thwarted by others, but instead “negotiate[s] differences in a way that recognizes mutual rights and intelligence and yet leads to a harmonious solution” (Sanders, p. 73).

When leaders display temperance through the effective management both of their own emotions as well as the emotional aspects of their relationships with others, they show themselves to be trustworthy. By developing this sense of trust, their ability to motivate and inspire others increases accordingly. Threatening subordinates or reacting to conflict in an overly emotional way is usually “ineffective and, in the long run, likely to be counterproductive” (Bass, 1990, p. 21). Northouse (2010) stated that while more research is needed, it appears that “people who are more sensitive to their emotions and the impact of their emotions on others” will likewise lead more effectively (p. 24).

### **Example of a Temperate Leader: Nelson Mandela**

#### **Brief biography**

Nelson Mandela was born to Chief Henry Mandelo of the Tembu Tribe in Transkei, South Africa on July 18, 1918. Educated at University College of Fort Hare and the University of Witwatersrand, at the age of 26, Mandela joined the African National Congress (ANC). As a leading member of this group, he took part in the resistance movement against South Africa's apartheid “policy of racial segregation and discrimination enforced by white minority governments” (Robinson, n.d., para. 1).

After being cleared of charges of treason in 1961, Mandela was later rearrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. He was incarcerated from 1964 until his release in 1990. Upon Mandela's release from prison, the ANC was reformed and he was elected President, “while his lifelong friend and colleague, Oliver Tambo, became the organisation's National Chairperson” (Frängsmyr, 1994, para. 4).

According to Frängsmyr (1994), while Mandela was imprisoned, his reputation continued to increase as he grew to be “widely accepted as the most significant black leader in South Africa and became a potent symbol of resistance as the anti-apartheid movement gathered strength. He consistently refused to compromise his political position to obtain his freedom” (para. 3).

#### **Mandela's Leadership**

There are several reasons why Nelson Mandela can be identified as a leader who demonstrated the virtue of temperance. First of all, according to Lodge (2006), one of Mandela's vital character traits was his “ability to shift from one kind of social situation to another, an ability that indicates an unusual imaginative capacity for empathy... [he] had the assurance and poise to cope with such situations... a depth of perception and flexibility as well as the capacity for negotiating social relationship and crossing social boundaries” (p. 50). Additionally, Mandela's demeanor while giving testimony in court provides evidence of “how much at ease he was in the courtroom with its polite conventions and reasoned dialogue... Even outside such tribunals Mandela's professional discipline could influence his behavior in other less formal settings”

(Lodge, 2006, p. 71). This poise and dignified manner is part of what set Mandela apart from many of his contemporaries.

According to Preskill & Brookfield (2009), “One of the dangers of learning leadership is that the longer one learns about leadership practice the more one becomes aware of just how deep and strong are the structural forces that oppose attempts to change the status quo” (p. 17). Overturning the status quo was exactly Mandela’s intention, and while he discovered just how difficult a task it would be, in his autobiography, he wrote several times about how he never doubted “that the dawn of a properly democratic South Africa was inevitable” (p. 18). His temperate attitude prevented him from becoming discouraged by his seeming lack of progress. Instead, he resolved to see it through to the end. Though it did take a long time to come about, Mandela lived to see apartheid overturned in 1994, and a non-white, himself, be elected as President of South Africa.

### Conclusion

History has shown that leaders will ultimately fall if they refuse to evaluate themselves and fail to recognize or acknowledge their own imperfections, including the areas in which they need improvement. While it is true that the mere possession of temperance does not guarantee a leader’s success, it is still a virtue that many successful leaders do embrace. When given the choice, it seems wise for organizational leaders to exercise temperance in both their leadership and their decision-making.

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### About the Author

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