



Transformational Leadership & Service Podcast

Episode 2 Transcript

Beware the Leadership Curse

When considering ways to enhance leadership, positive characteristics like honesty, integrity, vision and courage are usually addressed. However, we also need to focus on insidious personal habits which, unwittingly, chip away at the very foundation of our influence. One such leadership cancer is profanity.

Profanity is a tough issue to address. Our society passionately embraces the constitutionally protected freedoms of speech and public expression. While at lunch recently, I was seated next to a young man. Sadly, I was not terribly surprised when he opened his mouth and vulgarities spewed forth. He spoke loudly. Men, women and children (all present) could easily hear. But, he was not angry. Frankly, he seemed comfortable – at ease with this manner of communication. That made me uncomfortable.

Did I confront him? No. I must admit, there was a part of me that wanted to say, “Hey, buddy, don’t you get it? Don’t you realize that you’re driving people away with your words?” But I resisted. Why? Besides the possibility of an almost certain public confrontation, today, when someone dares question the appropriateness of such boorish public behavior, the confronter is too often labeled prudish, followed by heated accusations of perceived censorship. For the record, I am against limiting individual freedoms. However, I am for common sense applications of the freedoms we enjoy. I believe that just because we can do or say something doesn’t necessarily mean we should.

Am I saying I’ve never uttered an inappropriate comment? Absolutely not! The truth is I learned to “cuss” in fifth grade. I’m not proud of that fact. Such behavior was certainly not encouraged by my parents, teachers, coaches or other influential adults. But that didn’t stop me. Sadly, stringing together words I often couldn’t even define made me feel more in control, more grown up, more of a man.

As the years went by, I became bolder with my use of profanity. Over time, my cursing became a habit. A behavior requiring no thought. As a manager in the workplace, I believed profanity helped emphasize and drive home important points, thus making me more effective. My conversations became so sprinkled with expletives that, eventually, I failed to even recognize them as profanity. To me, it was just harmless “shop talk.” I never paused to consider what others might think of it.

So why this crusade against profanity by professionals? I now recognize that when one uses profanity, at least 25-50% of the people who hear it are offended. They

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may not say so publicly, but they are. You don't believe me? Take a little poll of the folks you work with. Simply ask how many of them enjoy hearing others curse on the job vs. how many would prefer to be shielded from profanity altogether. The results may surprise you.

But, I learned the hard way. No one had ever said to me, "Phil, I think you have great leadership potential. Great opportunities are out there if you would just curse more!" However, one day, early in my management career, a trusted mentor pulled me aside to say, "Phil, I think you have great leadership potential. I believe great opportunities are out there for you. But, do you realize your cursing is limiting your potential? You really can't afford to lose people's respect."

The leadership curse is not really the act of cursing at all. The leadership curse rests in not fully recognizing the tremendous effect our words, deeds and behaviors have on others.