

# OPINION

## LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



By Fusi Akinkugbe

# CHARACTER: Without it you cannot lead

I HAVE found that there are two fundamental requirements for effective leadership – and everything revolves around these two. In an earlier article I wrote about leadership capacity being one of these fundamentals. The other is character. Anyone who wants to make a difference in their field of endeavour today first needs the capacity i.e. the relevant skills and capabilities. However, to make the desired impact as a leader, these capabilities must operate within parameters that appropriately guide how they are used; parameters provided by the values which guide you morally and provide the basis for your making choices and decisions. So, being an effective leader is not just about the capabilities you require for leadership, but also about what underpins those capabilities that determines how they are used.

What is character? Character is your values in action. It is the outcome of your being tested in different situations

that require your moral judgement and decisions. Situations face us daily that require us to make choices, and it is these choices that define our character. Character is primarily seen through our conduct, but it also reflects in our attitudes.

There are a number of reasons why character is essential for effective leadership and here are three:

First, character validates and directs your leadership capacity. A person's character is what their leadership capacity rests on. No matter one's ability, character often determines the outcomes in a person's life and situations because our conduct and attitudes are the result of our choices. Let me give an example: if a someone has high capability but based on his or her values makes the choice to be dishonest, this choice will direct his capability towards being effective at being dishonest. His values will determine how he applies his ability – which is how character directs ability.

Capacity gives you the ability required for leadership, but character ensures you have the right motivations and attitude and is what enables you to make the right choices. You may have the capability to solve a problem or deliver required results, but it is your

character that ensures that your intentions are genuine. If you work in an organisation and have the responsibility for running an aspect of its activities, your capacity can make you proficient at knowing what to do, but if you lack char-

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acter, you cannot be trusted to use the resources entrusted to you for what they are intended for. Our values and the choices we make based on those values are what determine our outcomes. While leadership grows principally around capacity, it is sustained by character.

The second reason is that your character to a great extent determines your qualification to lead others. Character is a strong determinant of personal and organisational reputation, which affects business, relationships, and opportunities. If you desire to lead others, you must have strong positive character. A person who has positive character will always attract followers.

Character plays the greatest part in determining your credibility and provides the basis for trust by those you lead or seek to influence because without character, people cannot trust you.

Former U.S. President

Richard Nixon said: "You must not give power to a man unless, above everything else, he has character. Character is the most important qualification the president of the United States can have). Sadly, these words he spoke in 1964 came back to haunt him almost a decade later during the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s which implicated him. In his country's eyes he had failed the character test as their leader, and was no longer qualified to lead, leading to his resignation.

Thirdly, character sustains personal success. In the words of the late Ed Cole: "It is possible for your talent to take you to a place where your character cannot sustain

you". Well-known sportsmen, entertainers, corporate titans, politicians, and public figures have fallen from grace because their talent and capability took them to great heights but without the character to sustain their success, they came crashing down. Authors Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley in their book *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham*, said: "talent is not sufficient to sustain a leader's effectiveness if the ever-present human flaws are not addressed." Until character issues are addressed, capability will always be compromised.

In the world of sports, we see how character sustains success. Sportsmen and women known for their capacity developed through training and coaching and displayed in competitions, can only sustain their success by showing good

conduct through fair play in competition and adhering to rules such as not taking drugs or banned substances. If they make the choice to do any of these, it reflects negatively on their character, taking a toll on their achievements and limiting their potential. It is of no consequence if they have high capacity because their conduct is what matters. Their character effectively determines their future.

Since the choices we make define our character, should our circumstances determine our choices? For example, should I say: "Oh I have no choice - Nigeria is corrupt", implying I don't have options in the choices I can make because of my circumstances? The fact is people who have character strive to make good choices regardless of the circumstances. It won't be easy at all, and no one is saying it is but someone who has character will not adjust their standards to fit the different circumstances they find themselves in. Ultimately, character is a choice. If we believe the investment is worth it, then circumstances should not dictate that choice.

Thank you and until next week, let me challenge you to begin to lead from where you are.

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