



Good Leaders Choose Character, Not Comfort

Description

There are numerous times in a person's life when they are at a crossroads. One road is marked *comfort*. The other road is marked *character*. When people are asked which road they would take, they often say *character*. Yet while it sounds good, my observation is many actually choose *comfort*. Why? Because the comfort road looks less bumpy. The character road has bumps, obstacles, and headwinds.

There are key words that often indicate the person is choosing comfort. For example, they may say, "I would have said something, but I don't want to step on toes." Well, if the "something" would have made the company or community better, then the person opted for comfort versus character. Another example is when a person looks for someone else to carry the message for them. Recently someone wanted me to carry their message to the selection advisory committee on the hiring of the next superintendent for the Escambia County, Florida, school district. I shared that they needed to carry the message themselves. I know they preferred someone else to do it, yet if it is important to you, then you need to carry your own message.

Companies and communities benefit when people are willing to speak up no matter how uncomfortable it may be. Social media makes it even harder to step up at times.

Another big "comfort" challenge involves a leader's confronting and, if need be, letting go a high-revenue-producing person who treats others poorly. Often executives will tolerate a leader who cannot engage their employees with the excuse, "If we let the person go, we will have a hard time finding a replacement." Or they may say, "Yes, they are not good with employees; however, they know the technical aspects of the job very well." The question is, what is more important: revenue or values? Leaders who choose revenue or decide that now is not a good time to let someone else go for it is hard to replace them, are rationalizing their own fear of making the tough call. However, the tough call is the right call.

Discomfort occurs on a pain scale like the one that measures physical pain when we go to the doctor. It can range from using key words to increase customer satisfaction, to dealing with a sub-performer, to addressing a difficult customer, to admitting a mistake, to making a presentation, etc. I often share

when looking up *leadership* in the dictionary, the statement, “Do only what is comfortable,” does not exist. Like physical pain, the range of pain a leader must experience depends on the situation and the desired results.

Think about parenting. A parent makes many decisions that are not easy and are uncomfortable for themselves and others. When a parent grounds their child, it is not comfortable. In fact, it is painful, not only for the child but also for the parent. It’s sort of like, “I know you are angry and do not want to be around me, so let us spend the entire weekend in the same house.” I used to joke that grounding a child is usually worse on the parent than the child. Every good parent will make these types of decisions. Why? They love their child enough to create some discomfort for the greater good.

The question for leaders is this: *Do you care about your organization and/or community enough to be uncomfortable?* And the pain can be intense at times; however, it leads to much less pain (or even better, no pain) later on. The relief comes after the uncomfortable action is taken. Starting a workout program is very difficult at first; however, in the long run, the better health achieved is well worth the pain. No pain, no gain.

At times, an uncomfortable decision can even put one’s career at risk. A new hospital president noticed the patient satisfaction scores in the Emergency Department were some of the worst in the country. He met with the head of the emergency physician group. The medical director explained the issue was due to the type of patients who came to the Emergency Department, the neighborhood, the facility, and, on top of it all, the survey itself (which was not valid). The hospital president then shared that at contract time, patient satisfaction would be part of the agreement.

So, the Emergency Room group sent a letter of resignation to the hospital board president, giving their 90-day notice. The group figured the board would then straighten out the new hospital president. After all, they had been there for years, and the hospital president was new. The board accepted the resignation. The next 90 days were brutal for the hospital president. The medical director wanted the medical staff to investigate the situation and to have a vote of “no confidence” on the hospital president. Some of the staff were upset with the change. Despite it all, a year later, the new Emergency Room group was in place, patient satisfaction had improved, the staff liked the new group, and more patients came to the Emergency Room for care.

Now, this story might appear to be a no-brainer. But it is not. The new president could have easily accepted the situation; after all, the low patient satisfaction results had existed for years. No one likes to be faced with a possible “no confidence” vote. However, the hospital president chose to put the patients’ well-being ahead of his own comfort.

Those who lived in Pensacola around 2006 may recall the conversation regarding what is now the home of the Blue Wahoos Stadium, two office buildings, an amphitheater, and a playground with water access throughout. It is called Community Maritime Park. I was involved in getting the park built, and people on both sides of the issue had very strong feelings about it. Around this time, a friend shared that he and his wife were out to dinner with three other couples and one of the people was saying some very nasty things about me. I asked him what he did when he heard these things. He said, “Nothing, because I did not want to create an uncomfortable situation.”

When we are silent, it is seen by others that we are in agreement or supportive. If someone does or says something inappropriate and no one says anything, the person being inappropriate will interpret

this as agreement. If someone sends out a group email with something that you feel is not right and you say nothing, their behavior is reinforced.

A few tips to help you choose character over comfort:

1. Hold up the mirror. When one rationalizes, it is subconscious messaging. We send ourselves messages such as, *I do not want to step on toes*. This may make sense in some cases, but other times we need toe-steppers. Are we looking for someone to carry our message? Are we eager to say, “I could have told you that”? If so, why didn’t we speak up earlier? Are we too quick to say, “Now is not the right time”? Maybe it really isn’t the right time; however, often it is and we are just trying to avoid discomfort. Are we rationalizing *it’s not worth it*? Sometimes it is worth it—it depends on how important the issue is. Always hold up the mirror.

2. Don’t underestimate the impact your action can make. So often a person will think, *Who am I?* or, *What difference can I make?* The answer is plenty. How would life be different if people had chosen not to act? Rosa Parks decided to not move to the back of a bus, and it made a difference. And for every person we are aware of, there are hundreds of thousands of people who in their daily lives make a difference. Years ago, a parking lot attendant at Vanderbilt University Medical Center approached a couple and their child. They looked distraught. They shared their situation and how scared they were. The parking lot attendant listened and told them he knew they were in the right place. The father shared with me the parking lot attendant had a big impact on them. I am sure it was not easy for the parking lot attendant to go up to a family obviously in pain. He could have rationalized he did not want to interfere. It took courage.

3. Act. If not you, who? If not now, when? Taking the road of character-building over comfort-seeking is not easy. Many will choose not to. Be the person who chooses to act.

In summary, those who choose character will end up with more comfort than those who choose comfort. Why? Because they will not have to regret that they did not act. Those who choose comfort will often end up uncomfortable for they will realize they could have made a difference.

Great companies and communities are made by character-builders, not comfort-seekers. Choose character. Make a difference in the world. You won’t regret it.

Date Created

August 10, 2020

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