

IT IS THE QUALITY OF OUR CHARACTER THAT DETERMINES OUR PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS

Sarah McArthur

“Expect the unexpected and expect to deal with it - in a positive way.”

– Alan Mulally

Unexpected events happen all of the time. It wouldn't be life if everything always went according to plan. And that the unexpected is a fact of life is likely why the phrase “expect the unexpected,” with its origins in a quote by the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c. 535–475 BC) has remained an important expression for thousands of years. It is a timeless piece of advice reminding us to keep a frame of mind that is expectant of change, that is agile and prepared for the unexpected because, “The only constant in life is change,” another quote attributed to Heraclitus that remains a staple sage insight today.

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When we look a little closer, we can see that in every day there is a high probability of at least one unexpected low-impact event occurring. For instance, a colleague, friend, or family member needs a hand unexpectedly or an impromptu meeting gets called in the afternoon. You might get a flat tire on the way to work or you might get a call from a friend that you weren't expecting. These events are relatively low-impact, and they happen frequently. What is unexpected about them isn't that they happen, rather it is that we don't know which low-impact event will happen on any given day.

And then there are the low probability high-impact events that are unplanned, unexpected, and change the world as we know it in major ways, sometimes in an instant. For example, at the time that I am writing this column, we are nearing the 2024 presidential election in the United States. And, in just a few short weeks, we have witnessed an assassination attempt on our former president and 2024 Republican nominee, and our current president has dropped out of the presidential 2024 race passing the baton to the current vice president. Suffice to say, our political climate in the United States is navigating low probability, rare, yet high-impact unexpected events.

It seems these unexpected events are happening more often than they used to, which is in large part why the phrase "in our rapidly changing world" has become one of the most frequently used sentences in leadership literature today. Rapid change expected and not is what we are facing as a global society, and the leaders we need are those who lead us through this constant in

such a way that it unifies and heals rather than furthers division across the sectors and around the globe.

As a thought partner and advisor, I work with individuals and leaders on how they approach change and navigate the challenges of the unexpected to create a bright future for all of their stakeholders, including generations to come. We start with their values and the fact that the values by which we work together positively, such as inclusion, listening, helping, connection, civility, service, and a host of others which focus on cooperation, respect for all people, and building consensus, don't change. And they don't change even while the external circumstances influencing our working together are constantly changing and we may not always agree on the best plan, outcome, or result.

For example, most recently I was working with a client who had coached a leader who was facing an unexpected event that would impact productivity. To meet the performance goal, the leader needed to bend on their values just slightly, and was upset to be put in this position and faced with such a choice. Yet, in the end, the leader chose to bend just a touch to meet goals and stay employed rather than to live the values agreed upon by the leadership team and committed to by the entire company.

My client understood the leader's challenge and had also faced the choice at times to either bend slightly or lose an account, program, or client. With some disappointment in themselves, they said that they too had sometimes chosen to bend. The personal issue with this is letting ourselves down. If we look in the mirror, we may see a lesser version of ourselves than we would like to see. The larger issue of acquiescing even ever so slightly is that when we bend to produce, what we produce is bent.

Could this be at the root of our challenges today? That under the constant of rapid change and the unexpected and the pressure of meeting quarterly goals and outcomes, we are bending our behavior just slightly from our values, and thus our results are just slightly bent. Of course, this would mean that the more our decisions, behavior, and actions are not aligned with

our values, the more skewed from our values will be the result. Alignment of our beliefs, values, and behaviors takes great courage, strength, and determination. It is why great leaders, such as our founding editor-in-chief Frances Hesselbein, are respected and admired as they are.

Frances often said, “In the end, it is the quality and character of the leader that determines the performance, the results.” What she meant is that who we are will have everything to do with our success and our effectiveness as leaders. [Hesselbein, “The Leaders We Need,” *Leader to Leader*, Winter 2005 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ltl.106>] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ltl.106>

How we face and navigate low- and high-impact events, the natural constant of change, is how we lead. Those who follow us can see our character, because in the end, it is our actions and behaviors that reveal our character. They reveal who we are. To illustrate this point ever so clearly, Frances often recited the following quote in her speeches and with friends.

Be careful of your thoughts, for your thoughts become your words;

Be careful of your words, for your words become your deeds;

Be careful of your deeds, for your deeds become your habits;

Be careful of your habits, for your habits become your character;

Be careful of your character, for your character becomes your destiny.

~ Author Anonymous

So, let us ask ourselves, who am I? As a leader, citizen, worker, family member, and individual, what are my beliefs and values, and are my actions and words aligned with them?

In the end, in today’s rapidly changing world where external circumstances change and the unexpected

happens, when we meet the unexpected with our thoughts, words, and behavior aligned in a positive way we bring “hope, healing and unity within the organization and beyond the walls,” {ibid} and the results and outcome benefit us all.

Thank you, Alan Mulally, for our many discussions that led to this column.

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