

Facet: Restraint

Restraint: A Virtue of Leadership

By Scott Weighart

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We are familiar with the themes of emotional intelligence ([Daniel Goleman](#)), humility ([Jim Collins](#)), and resonance ([Richard Boyatzis & Annie McKee](#)) in the leadership literature. These authors remind us that active-assertive energies alone do not explain exemplary leadership.

Our attentive-receptive-reflective capacities enable us and those we lead to notice, listen, and consider matters in an open, empathic attitude. This, in turn, allows matters to be seen more completely, from multiple points of view, in a fuller gestalt, and for their manifold implications.

Sound like a bunch of words? Well, it's not. Cognitive science reveals that affectively toned attitudinal states predispose us to see more or less of what is available to be seen. It does this by either suspending or activating constraints on our observational capacities ("filters").

You see, there is nothing "mere" about words when they operate with this mental effect. As we reflectively consider their meanings, we enter associational networks that are otherwise filtered, kept from view. A calm, deliberate verbal patter invokes an attitudinal shift and evokes insight.

With this as context, I would like to examine the notion of *restraint*. It directs us, as we discover its meaning and cultivate it as a practice, toward an attitudinal condition that qualifies, in my opinion, as an intellectual and practical virtue of leadership.

Restraint

First, consider the lexical definition: Re.straint - *an act of restraining, hindering, checking, or holding back from some activity or expression; a means, force, or agency that restrains,*

checks free activity (Merriam-Webster). Of course, the sense of this word that I have in mind is that which concerns the free and deliberate action or agency of the leader.



Therefore, I offer this "stipulative" definition: *Restraint is a consciously moderated response to situations in which we are presented with elevated levels of social-emotional stimulus that arouse concern.* The agent (leader) notices a self-state of arousal and, through practiced personal discipline, recognizes the need to exercise restraint.

Deconstructing Restraint

- The leader's initial experience and felt sense of the stimulus situation may register implicitly before becoming an explicit call to action.
- Paradoxically, the call to action invokes a suspension of overt action, that is, reaction - the first agenic act is to suspend action.
- The felt concern is appraised as a potential threat of emotional overload, crisis-level intensity that may impair a considered response.
- Restraint emerges not to eliminate concern, but to calm it, place it in the background while marshaling thoughtful coping resources.
- By relegating concerns to the background, space is made to hold multiple concerns in abeyance rather than rashly dismissing them or reacting to them.
- As restrained action proceeds, still further moments of acute concern may arise calling for further acts of restraint.
- The mental-emotional energies required to exercise restraint are finite and can be exhausted, so they must be restored.
- Therefore, sustainable capacities for restraint depend on self-care, which, in turn, depends on self-awareness and personal discipline.



- Seen in this light, restraint is a virtue essential to moral and prudential judgment in commerce, community affairs, and in our personal lives.

Practical Effects of Restraint

There are many practical benefits that a leader and those he/she leads obtain from mastering the discipline of restraint. Some bear upon the immediate issues at hand and others have an even broader and longer term impact on organizational capacity.

Inwardly, restraint stills the swirl of emotions that can cause confusion and paralyze intelligent agenic action. In the stillness, restraint quickens our notice and sorting of substantive issues, which are amenable to resolution through action, which are not. It allows relative priorities to announce and order themselves.

Overtly, those we lead receive the calming presence that empowers them to discover and express their agenic capacities to act intelligently as well. More mental energies are invested in understanding one another and the issues at hand, which leads to well-reasoned action plans. This progress bolsters confidence, resilience, and organizational capacity for problem solving.

Conclusion

Virtues have always struck me as valued ways of being that are best appreciated in their irreducible simplicity. This special, enriched state of simplicity can often only be realized by first winding one's way through a manifold of considerations and discovering how they carry us back to a single foundational quality of being.

I hope that you will consider how the virtue of restraint in leadership may be relevant to you. Its virtue is perhaps even of more paramount value today insofar as the pace of life, work, commerce, and communications has increased due to our technological innovations. If our technology is not to become our master, however, we must moderate its influence.

To paraphrase a popular advertising slogan, "Restraint does not make leadership; it makes leadership better."

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