

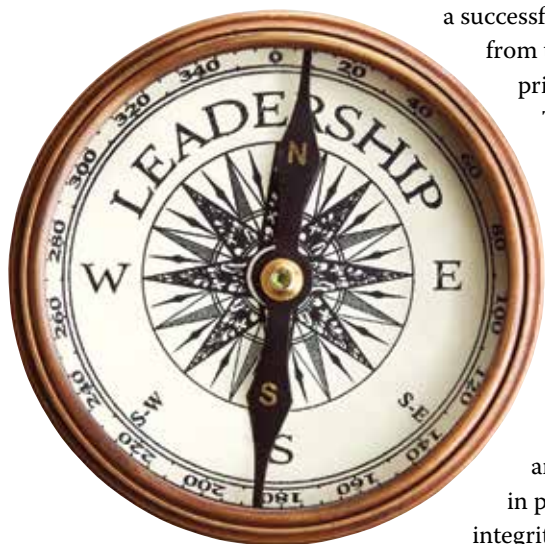
# Leadership and Virtues—Prudence

By Joe Whitefield

Leaders at all levels within an organization face numerous challenges that demand responses—responses that must be both thoughtful and personal in order to be effective. They must be thoughtful in the sense that the ideas and initiatives behind them are smart, specific, feasible, and workable. They must be personal because, in many cases, the will and energy required to implement an initiative and shepherd it to a successful conclusion are drawn from the qualities that comprise the leader's character. This is why character is so very important when

not everyone agrees with these views. One person's health concern is another person's freedom concern and vice versa. These types of conflicts exist in abundance today. So let's consider ways for leaders to address these kinds of problems as we navigate the morality minefield of competing values.

I suggest one of the leading contributors to cultural problems is the devaluing of values themselves. There was a time when virtues—cardinal virtues if you prefer—were considered to be values of a higher order. A person exhibiting these virtues would be respected for his or her integrity even above intelligence (think statesman instead of politician).



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we evaluate leadership and leadership potential in people. Intelligence and integrity are thought to be the winning ticket for leaders. Although that may be partially true, I think it is not quite that simple.

## COMPETING VALUES

I have observed that intelligent people do not always share the same values. Or if they share the same values, they do not share them in the same measure or order of priority. These differences can lead to numerous conflicts and inconsistent messages, causing divisions within organizations and communities.

Take, for example, the difference between social perceptions of tobacco use versus recreational marijuana use. Cigarette smoking is more and more restricted because it is seen as a health issue, while marijuana use is becoming legalized in some states because it is seen as a freedom or rights issue. But

As a reminder, these virtues include prudence, courage, justice, and patience, if you add faith, hope, and charity you have the full list. When was the last time you discussed virtues within your organization? If rarely or never, now might be a good time for a review of them, and prudence may be a good place to start.

## PRUDENCE AND DISCRETION

Prudence seems to have fallen out of favor with many people these days. No one really wants to be called a “prude.” Prudence was actually part of the punchline in the famously funny *Saturday Night Live* skits that satirized President George H.W. Bush, who often repeated, “It wouldn’t be prudent.” The diminished regard for this virtue is unfortunate. Especially when you consider what it entails.

Often thought of as wisdom, prudence also encompasses discernment and a determination of actions that are appropriate for a given situation. Civility and decorum also come to mind when I

think about prudence. It is more than simply having the right answers (intelligence) and pushing yourself to the front. Prudence considers the pushing process. It understands that progress, to be truly effective and long lasting, is better when others are persuaded rather than forced. Being right is not the same as being effective.

Prudence bridges this gap by asking questions. What is the wise thing to do? How should this be approached? What needs to be said? What doesn't need to be said? I hope you didn't miss the key element here: *discretion*. There are many instances in which discretion can do more to advance a cause than talking more can ever do. Just because you *think* something, doesn't mean you have to *say* it. I find discretion to be one of the most appealing qualities in others.


#### GIVING CONSENSUS A CHANCE

Prudence can be the antidote for many of our cultural battles. When prudence is absent, the environment can become overly political in its tone. Although you may have heard of political correctness running amok, when have you heard of prudence running amok? Prudence allows discussions to replace accusations and talking to replace shouting, thus giving consensus a chance.

To be sure, consensus is not always attainable. There are times when the proper response will require bold actions that are not popular. However, in these situations, prudence is still present and still the key to success. When the propriety of an action is considered along with its expediency—that is the definition of prudence.

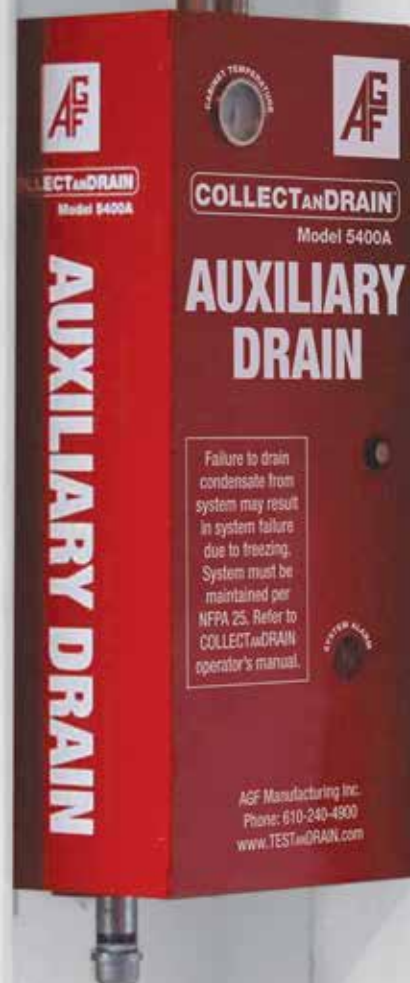
Leadership today demands character no matter how talented or intelligent the leader is. I submit that character should be more than a simple set of values that are promoted and adhered to on a situational basis.

Virtues are loftier. Because they are more properly displayed than declared, virtues are hard to fake. If you take them on, your leadership can be bolstered as your intelligence and

integrity will be more integrated, more consistent, and more effective. And, it would be prudent to start with prudence. 

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