

Developing Courageous Leaders through Positive Character and Fitness as well as High Purpose and Virtuous Action

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1. Introduction: inspiring courage in action.

In thinking about how to help our law students develop into courageous leaders, I have been drawn back to a video posted on the Internet over a decade ago. It is a silent recording from a truck dashboard camera of a highway accident in 2013 on a three-lane limited access highway. The recording shows a car in front burst into flames and come to a stop. The drivers of other vehicles react, but in different ways. One carefully goes around the burning vehicle and drives off. A second stops but does nothing. A third backs up. Finally, the recording shows what appears to be the driver of the truck emerging from his cab with a fire extinguisher to try to put out the blaze. His example apparently leads others to join him, as other figures emerge into the dashcam image heading toward the damaged car to help the occupants. While the video concludes before the outcome is clear, their collective efforts appear to have saved lives.

What can we do as law teachers to help our students develop into courageous leaders in the legal profession like this truck driver was in his? I would like to advance two related ideas. The first is using positive character and fitness as aspirational goals for our students, not just minimum standards for admission to the practice of law, as foundations for leadership. The second is using insights about high purpose and virtuous action to aid law student leadership development.

At the outset, we need to help our students develop not only the requisite qualities of character to lead but also the fitness to do so.² In other words, for them to bring out the best in other people, they need to be at their best. This goal echoes the new ABA requirement that all American Law Schools help their students form their professional identity, including “exploring well-being practices.”³ This is the equivalent of making sure the driver of the truck was properly equipped to respond as he did. In other words, the legal knowledge, skills, and values we teach our students must also include how to attend to their own well-being.⁴

2. Well-being as a foundation for leadership.

In helping students learn elements of fitness for their well-being, I have found the acronym REVAMP helpful to my students, as it represents six of them: Relationships, Engagement, Vitality, Meaning and Purpose. I have also found that asking students to maintain a weekly positive activity log reporting on how they have fulfilled these elements helps build that understating into practice, reinforced by giving them a small cube with each of the REVAMP

¹ Professor of Law, Suffolk University Law School; Visting Scholar, Center for Positive Leadership, University of Louisville (2023-24); Copyright 2025, R. Lisle Baker.

² See Baker, R. Lisle, *Character and Fitness for Leadership: Learning Interpersonal Skills*, 58 SANTA CLARA L.R. 101 (2018); Baker, R. Lisle, *Character and Fitness for Leadership: Educating Lawyers for Compassion and Courage as well as Brains: The Wizard of Oz was Right*, 14 TENN. J. LAW & POLICY 287 (2020).

³ See Baker, R. Lisle, *Exploring Well-being Practices as Part of Law Student Development of a Positive Professional Identity*, 58 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 821 (2023).

⁴ *Id.*

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letters on the six faces as reminder.⁵ In a brief Appendix below, I have provided a summary of how to develop these six elements.

3. The importance of a high purpose.

Aside from fitness, the video clip also highlights the importance of a worthy purpose, as what causes some acts to be labeled courageous and others reckless can be the stakes involved.⁶ Would we have thought the truck driver as courageous if the burning vehicle had been a driverless car? Putting life and limb to save property rather than people would seem more foolish than brave, a task better left to professional firefighters.

In the case of lawyers, the pursuit of justice can itself involve risks, but also inspire others to emulate its pursuit, as the life of exemplary lawyers can do.⁷ Reflection on our purpose is closely aligned with Meaning in the six elements of REVAMP, but helps students reconnect with why they wanted to become a lawyer, and to reflect on the qualities of character they would like to bring to their roles as lawyers and as leaders. In my courses, I have invited students to learn about their own character strengths, how they are best used, and how they can leverage the strengths of those they lead.⁸ Here character is like the translucent body of the REVAMP cube that provides the foundation for specific action. But while character implies more of who we are than what we do, it is also displayed in concrete activity, like the truck driver's heroic action with the burning car in the video. How can we help our students lead with high purpose? One way may be to ask them to lead with virtues in mind.

4. Bringing high purpose to leadership situations by virtuous action.

This academic year I have been a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Positive Leadership at the University of Louisville.⁹ In learning from the work of the Center, I have prompted to think of positive character also as a dynamic idea – as virtuous action. (Virtues are standards of moral excellence, such as courage, compassion, humility, honesty, or generosity.) This idea builds on what several participants have written about, such as the value of leadership education, as well as personal agency within a community to lead positive change.¹⁰ In the video, the truckdriver clearly had the virtue of compassion for the occupants of the burning car sufficiently to draw him into action, which in turn enlisted others.

This example might be seen as a way of explaining the work of the Center for Positive Leadership. In a nutshell, the Center's model of positive leadership involves exceptional virtuous



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⁶ Cynthia L. S. Pury, Charles B. Starkey & Laura R. Olson, *Value of Goal Predicts Accolade Courage: More Evidence That Courage Is a Taking a Worthwhile Risk*, 19 J. Pos. PSYCH. 236 (2024).

⁷ E.g., the work of Justice Department Lawyer John Doar described in Douglas O. Linder & Nancy Levitt, *THE GOOD LAWYER: SEEKING QUALITY IN THE PRACTICE OF LAW* (Oxford Press 2014).

⁸ See Baker, R. Lisle: *Cultivating wellness in those who lead and those who are led*:

<https://traininglawyersasleaders.org/2021/11/23/cultivating-wellness-in-those-who-lead-and-those-who-are-led/> (last visited Dec. 26, 2024).

⁹ <https://positiveleadership.louisville.edu/> (last visited Dec. 26, 2024).

¹⁰ E.g., Teague, Leah, *Growing Number of Leadership Programs and Courses Supports Professional Identity Formation*, 62 SANTA CLARA L. REV. (2022); Townsend, Kenneth, *Preconditions of Leadership in Law*, 56 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 859 (2021); and Heminway, Joan MacLeod, *Change Leadership and the Law School Curriculum*, 62 SANTA CLARA L. REV. 43 (2022).

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conduct by someone acting in a leadership role which inspires exceptional conduct on the part of followers.¹¹ The basic idea is asking what it would mean to exhibit those virtues in a way that would inspire and elevate oneself and others, then putting those ideas into action. This is what happened when others came forward after the truck driver went to help those in the burning car. In that case, there was not much time for reflection before acting. In other contexts, however, when reflective action is possible, the Center has developed a variety of tools available for free.¹² They include online self-assessment, an online guided advanced reflection on leadership experiences, and an extensive list of resources organized around self-transformation, transforming others and settings and system transformation.¹³

The Center has also published a smart phone App called the *Leadership Amplifier* available at modest cost.¹⁴ While designed for use in business where teams are more common than in law practice, students can use the App to plan for an upcoming leadership opportunity, including choosing one or more virtues, like courage, which may be relevant. They can even consult others in their community on whom they want to rely for their advice, like partners in a law firm. Using the *Leadership Amplifier*, they then can reflect in advance about how they might display more courage (or other virtues) in a way appropriate to the situation and the likelihood of inspiring better conduct by the followers. Dr. Ryan Quinn, Director of the Center, reports that he has found that regular use of the *Leadership Amplifier* by his students leads them to think before acting in the moment even without its coaching prompts. As I am on sabbatical leave this academic year, I want to explore using the Amplifier myself as well as enable some of my students to do so during the next academic year after I return to active teaching.

While it is not formally part of the App, the process of planning and reflection that the App involves can also be used to remind students that virtuous action may not only involve responding to the situation, as did the truck driver in the video, but also about changing a leadership situation itself. Consider Boston Lawyer and Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, who gave his time and talent to help improve the situation of the public as well as his clients.¹⁵

5. Conclusion.

In summary, in helping our students develop into courageous leaders, we can proceed in two directions: developing a positive foundation of their character and fitness, and then adding to that planning and reflection involving high purpose and virtuous action. The overall pedagogical objective is to equip our students with the skills and tools they need so that they can bring out the best in themselves to bring out the best in those they may lead.

¹¹ <https://positiveleadership.louisville.edu/> (last visited Dec. 26, 2024).

¹² <https://positiveleadership.louisville.edu/resources-all-tools/> (last visited Dec. 26, 2024).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/leadership-amplifier/id1512665299> (last visited Dec. 26, 2024). The cost for classroom (or team) use ranges from \$59.99 for up to 30 members to \$189.99 for up to 120 members. The App may be used for free for a trial run by up to three people.*Id.*

¹⁵ Baker, R. Lisle & Campbell, Peter Scott, *Louis D. Brandeis and the Formation of a Positive Professional Identity*, 54 SUFFOLK U. L. REV. 275 (2023). His life also exemplified values, guiding principles and well-being practices that were important to his positive professional identity, such as his compassion and courage, as well as his relationships, engagement, vitality, achievement, meaning, and positive emotions. *Id.*

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Appendix

Here are six elements of well-being we can use to enhance our fitness to lead: **R**elationships, **E**ngagement, **V**itality, **A**chievement, **M**eaning and **P**ositive emotions encapsulated in the acronym: **REVAMP**.

R - Relationships. This can have multiple aspects, from having a sense of belonging (as being a member of a club or a group), to making positive interpersonal connections. These can range from keeping in touch with family and friends (including responding appreciatively to good news shared) to being more involved with acquaintances and even strangers. (Research indicates that we generally anticipate a conversation with strangers will not work out, where the experimental evidence suggests otherwise.) Also, sometimes it is helpful to find someone – usually a peer - that we can talk with, understands us, and is concerned for our welfare (building on a recent “Battle Buddy” practice in the military).

E - Engagement. Give others undivided attention, which means putting away electronic devices so they are not visible distractions. Take time to record something important that has been read or learned, as memories fade fast. Clear workspace. Try noticing when our mind wanders so we can bring it back, which is a way to build capacity for greater focus. Concentration is a trainable skill, just like strength.

V - Vitality. Real breaks enhance performance which means more than taking time to check our messages, as we are using the same mental capacity on something else. Get up, move around – vigorously if possible - and get outside for a walk to look at something natural, as our world inside is geometric. Remember nutrition and sleep, as sleep does important cognitive work as well as restore us.

A - Achievement. Notice what we have accomplished (including doing nothing successfully) and not just what has not yet been done. Also, research indicates that planning for obstacles and how we can overcome them often leads to more success, such as committing to walk with someone so that we won't put it off. Finally, complimenting someone on their effort as well as their outcome gives a chance to notice their strengths at work, a deeper appreciation than only noting something visibly positive, such as their appearance.

M - Meaning. Keep in mind the importance of what we do, the why behind the what. Having a larger purpose in mind can help when things seem tedious or difficult. We serve ourselves best when we also serve others and a cause greater than ourselves.

P - Positive emotions. While not discounting the positive value of seemingly negative emotions such as sadness, anger, anxiety, or disgust, emotions like joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe and love, while often more fleeting, can aid resilience. Regular journals offer a way to record positive experiences to savor them again when skies are gray. When in doubt, we can adopt an attitude of gratitude and send a thank you note or lend a hand to someone in need. These activities can take us outside of ourselves.

Also, while some elements may be more important at different times, they can also be helpful in combination. For example, a walk with a friend can aid relationships as well as call up positive feelings. Finally, remember the six elements of **REVAMP** are not a formula, but a framework. We can use it both to evaluate our well-being and to improve it so that we can bring out our best to bring out the best in those we may lead.