

Leadership Case Study: Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukrainian President

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Leadership Case Study

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky: From Comedian to President to Statesman to Wartime Leader to the Defender of Western Democracy

Volodymyr Zelensky was born January 25, 1978 in Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine, USSR (now in Ukraine). A career comedian who was elected president of Ukraine in 2019. Although he was a political novice, Zelensky's anti-corruption platform won him widespread support, and his significant online following translated into a solid electoral base. He won a landslide victory over incumbent Petro Poroshenko in the second round of the 2019 presidential election.

Pre-April 2019 Volodymyr Zelensky was a well-known Ukrainian comedian, yet within a thousand days, he would find himself being met with a standing ovation from diplomats as he addressed the European Parliament via video as the President of Ukraine, telling those in attendance that his country is *"fighting for survival"*. It is an extraordinary journey, inspirational, unbelievable. *"We are fighting for our land and our freedom,"* Zelensky said, causing the EU translator on the English language feed to choke up with emotion. *"This is our motivation, but we are fighting also to be equal members of Europe"* Zelensky added. *"I believe that today we are showing everybody that's exactly what we are."* He raised his fist in defiance, they stood in admiration and applause. This was a reaction not just to what was said, or how it was said, but by whom it was said, the man himself and not a President.

Winston Churchill once said, *"Of all the talents bestowed upon men, none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king."*

Zelensky has proven himself a great orator, indeed some of his speeches and phraseology are Churchillian in content, phraseology, and impact. Much like Churchill he is a most unlikely candidate to become revered for his speech-making and leadership and yet he dominates the narrative against his experienced adversary, Vladimir Putin. Each time Zelensky speaks publicly he captures the moment, the imagination, the attention not just of his people, but the entire worldwide democratic community. In less than one week he has become defined as the defender of the free world. Most importantly, it is his countrymen and women, the Ukrainian people that his impact is felt, for they have been strengthened, inspired, and given a belief and a purpose.

Zelensky reportedly tried to talk to Vladimir Putin directly to avoid the war but was met with *"silence"*. He said that both nations did not need a war *"not a Cold War, not a hot war. Not a hybrid one"* before issuing a courageous warning, *"But if we come under attack, if we face an attempt to take away our country, our freedom, our lives, and the lives of our children, we will defend ourselves. When you attack us, you will see our faces, not our backs, but our faces."*

In the US, Zelensky is being compared by some to the late former Hollywood actor and US President, Ronald Reagan, who in 1987 passionately said, *"Mr Gorbachev, open this gate... Tear down this wall"* after the Cold War eventually ended. Four decades later, Zelensky's comments, like *"Free people! Free country!"* and *"We Ukrainians are a peaceful nation. But if we remain silent today, we will be gone tomorrow!"* are similarly resonating with people across the globe.

One of his most powerful quotes is *"The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride."* Zelensky spoke these words when he was asked to evacuate Kyiv with the support of the US government, but he immediately declined the offer, stating unequivocally he would stay and fight with the people of his country.

In an earlier television address, he also revealed that he is Russia's primary target. He said, *"I know that a lot of misinformation and rumours are being spread right now. It is claimed that I have left Kyiv. I remain in the capital; I am staying with my people. My family is not a traitor, but a citizen of Ukraine."*

According to our information, the enemy marked me as the number one target. My family is the number two goal. They want to destroy Ukraine politically by destroying the Head of State." He did so in defiance and without fear.

As the attack against Ukraine entered an intense phase, Zelensky addressed the nation while boosting the people's morale. He said, *"Our military, our national guard, our national police, our territory defence, special service, nationals of Ukraine, will carry on. We will win. Glory to Ukraine. We are successfully holding back the enemy's attacks. We know we are defending our land and the future of our children."*

Commentary and social media praises Zelensky, noting his authenticity to be a moving attribute, but what does authenticity mean? Leaders and followers both associate authenticity with sincerity, honesty, and integrity. It is, putting it simply, the real thing and to most the attribute that uniquely defines great leaders.



In Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones' Harvard Business Review article, *Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership* (December 2005), they note *"While the expression of an authentic self is necessary for great leadership, the concept of authenticity is often misunderstood, not least by leaders themselves. They often assume that authenticity is an innate quality—that a person is either authentic or not. In fact, authenticity is a quality that others must attribute to you. No leader can investigate a mirror and say, "I am authentic". A person cannot be authentic on his or her own. Authenticity is largely defined by what other people see in you and, as such, can to a great extent be controlled by you. If authenticity were purely an innate quality, there would be little you could do to manage it and, therefore, little you could do to make yourself more effective as a leader."*

To this end, they focus on five areas of development that can allow a leader to progress themselves, which if recognised and understood could enhance your authenticity:

- Managing the perception
- Know yourself and others
- Use where you come from
- Be a person for all seasons
- Conform— but only just enough



Specifically, when considering Zelensky, you find Goffee's and Jones' observations on 'Use where you come from' to be present in his speechmaking:

"By the time a manager rises to a senior leadership position, he may seem like—and, indeed, may well be—a very different person than he was at the start of his journey. But despite any role playing that goes on, the leader's authenticity is still closely linked to his origins. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines "authenticity", in part, as "of undisputed origin". As a result, we think it is fair to say that no leader will ever succeed in establishing his authenticity unless he can effectively manage his relationship with his past and his followers' connections to their roots."

The eloquence and simplicity of his oratory has led to a deepening of the sense of Ukrainian nationhood, which has drawn the Ukrainian people to a common purpose, to take up arms, to put to one side individual histories and to focus on the history of their country and its right to self-determination. This is the armament of war that no invading force can entirely distinguish, trying to do so will only drive it deeper and make it stronger. In a modern context, he has mastered social media and made himself available; it is raw, it is immediate, it is chillingly present.

In the days that have passed since Russia invaded the Ukraine, I have had time to reflect on my own sense of nationhood. The history of the blood spilled on the Normandy beaches on D-Day June 6, 1944, feels far closer today than 10 days ago and significant. This moment of reflection prompted me to ponder on my own service in the British Army, and a second paradox that is the motto of The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, To Serve to Lead.

"Serve to Lead is of course a paradox", "But it is a paradox which must be understood by every officer cadet", it goes to conclude that "If cadets have not understood the meaning of the paradox, they have no business aspiring to be officers in the British Army" (An Anthology, The Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst).

On the 6 August 1991 I stood rigid and to attention on the parade square before Old College, The Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. Like all officers that have had the privilege to pass out from Sandhurst, as I marched up the steps into Old College I threw my Academy hat into the air. At that moment I was commissioned into Her Majesty's Army as a young lieutenant charged and trained to lead soldiers, if necessary, into war.

Within moments I found my father, who had also served in the army. *"What makes a good officer?"* I asked. He paused, catching my gaze before responding *"It is not how to become a good officer; it is what makes you a good leader. You have to remember your soldiers will salute the rank, but they will fight for the man."*

In this statement I fully understood the Academy's motto, three words that would continually remind me that as leaders you are in service of those that you have been given the privilege and responsibility to lead. Where leadership is best demonstrated by those

that are instinctively prepared and willing to make personal sacrifices for their soldiers, their platoon, their regiment, their country [or in a commercial context your team members, colleagues, and customers]. Zelensky has shown us these qualities, and yet he has not been militarily trained, or indeed, had any leadership training at all.

At Sandhurst you are taught that great leaders will never sacrifice their soldiers or their teams to fulfil their personal needs or to shower glory upon themselves. To this end Sandhurst shows that you can train and produce leaders and those that have become great leaders were not necessarily born one. Authenticity is imbued in this narrative, whilst not being specially stated and yet, Zelensky contradicts this statement or at least it shows him to be an exception to it, as he would appear to have been gifted the essence of leadership.

In this case he also aligns himself naturally to the Serve to Lead doctrine which determines that men and women you are responsible for are your priority, their interests will always come before yours. From my 25 years post-army working with global banks and asset managers, it is a lesson that is mostly crowded out in large, high-tech enterprises where leaders manage more and lead less and are invariably results-driven, usually tied irrevocably to short-term revenue targets.

The second meaning of those three simple words is that as leaders you serve, or are employed, to lead. Their primary job as a leader is to lead and provide leadership. Yet because of the route that many take to leadership, they often fall into the trap of being busy *"doing things"*, instead of being busy leading, falling into the trap of leading in their spare time. But as an extension of Serve to Lead, what is service in leadership?

Service leadership is the powerful force that occurs once a person discovers their heart to serve, answers their call to lead, and summons their courage to engage. Each component part is wholly represented by Zelensky, but this has not come from training, it has come from within, which demonstrates that whilst leaders can be made, some are also gifted the means of being one and may well not know they have these capabilities until called upon to lead.

It is personal courage at that moment of understanding that will take you forward, driving into and aligned to the purpose you have inherited or defined.

Conversely, management schools have sought to turn leadership into a science and the regulators have sought to codify it through rules; both believing if practices and rules are embedded and adhered to, your purpose as a leader will reshape your company into a purposeful organisation. This begs the question 'Did the leaders set the purpose or did the purpose drive selection of the leadership?'

Leadership is the action of leading people in a country, an army, a company towards achieving goals. Leaders do this by influencing the behaviours of those within their care and charge in several ways. A leader sets a clear vision, motivates those around them, guides them through the process and with authenticity builds morale, heightens productivity, embeds loyalty, and gets people to do things they would never have considered doing beforehand, but does so with eagerness and courage that has come from the empowerment and example set by their leader.

Ursula von der Leyen (European President) noted *"Zelensky's leadership, his bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian people are an inspiration to us all."* Boris Johnson (UK Prime Minister) paid tribute to the *"leadership and courage"* of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, adding *"I think he has inspired and mobilised not only his own people, he is inspiring and mobilising the world in outrage at what is happening in Ukraine."*

The US President has also praised the Ukrainian President on his leadership, saying at his State of the Union speech, "Now is the hour. Our moment of responsibility. Our test of resolve and conscience, of history itself," adding as he drew his address to a close, "It is in this moment that (the) character of this generation is formed, our purpose is found, our future is forged."

There is a sobering, hapless irony that whilst the Western powers and their leaders stand as one on the international platform, shouting across the political abyss their support for the Ukraine and simultaneously acknowledging the democratic way of life nurtured and protected for almost 80 years is under its greatest threat since 1945, one of Europe's youngest democracies, which craves to be a member of the EU, is left in isolation to not only defend itself but them as well. And that it is being led by a man who but three years ago used his stage to calvinise humour and laughter.

His defiant social media videos and determination to lead his country, against logic, against the odds, built upon his courage, his authenticity and the collective purpose engrained in the Ukrainian people, has given the world an insight into leadership infrequently seen or experienced in government or politics or the board rooms of the corporate Western world today. Of course, these are uniquely challenging circumstances that have led to the rise of Zelensky as a wartime leader, but one hopes the point of commonality the Western politicians and corporate leaders have in their support of Zelensky, is that they understand they have been witness to a masterclass in leadership and that his students have listened and learnt from this demonstration.

Volodymyr Zelensky, we salute you.

"But if we come under attack, if we face an attempt to take away our country, our freedom, our lives, and the lives of our children, we will defend ourselves. When you attack us, you will see our faces, not our backs, but our faces."

- President Zelensky



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