

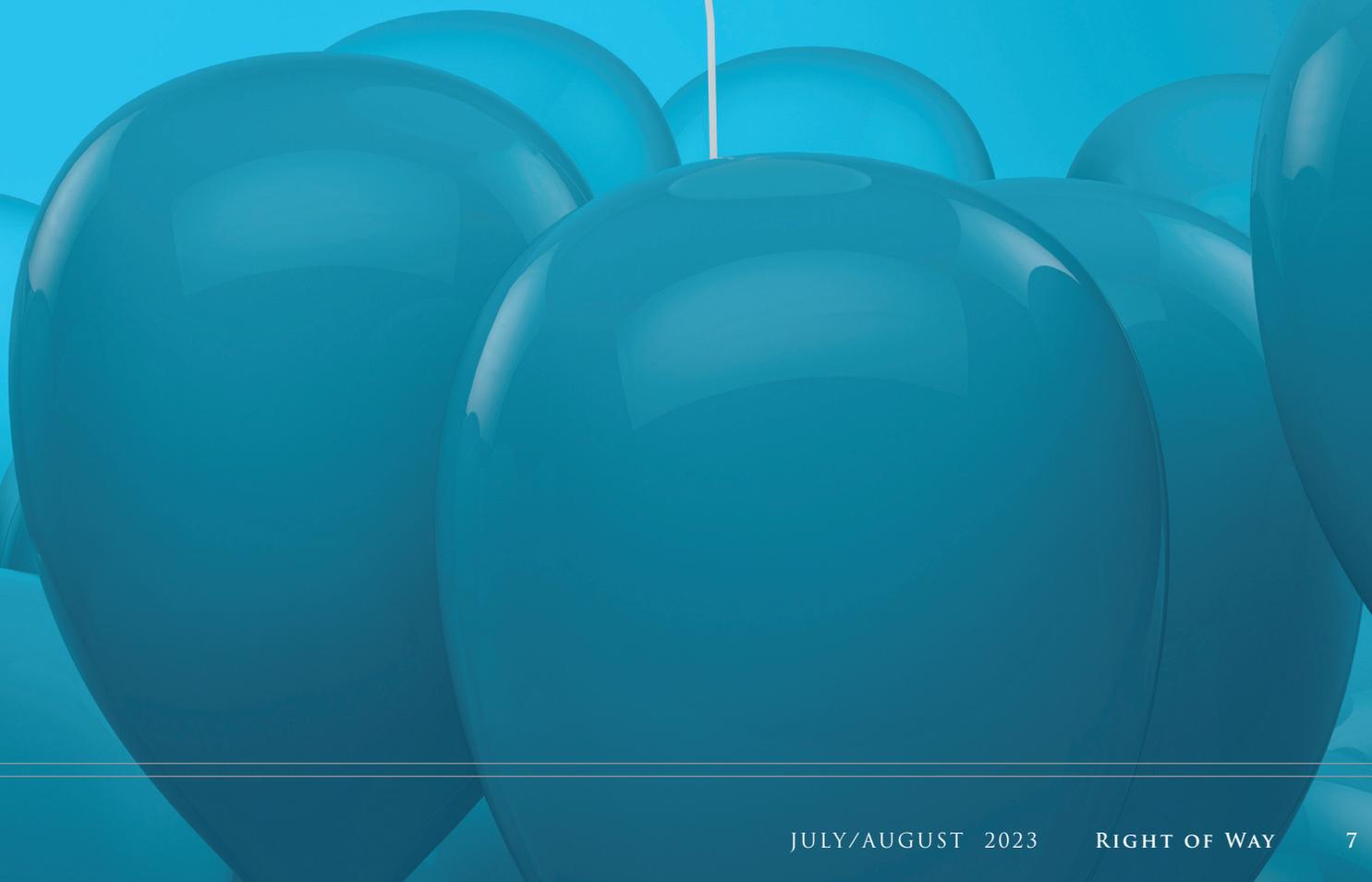
# ASCEND HIGHER

A profound theme to guide leaders

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

It is July, and the bright sun now warms us wherever we are. Another annual international education conference has come and gone, but the memories remain fresh in our minds. The theme of this year's conference in Denver, Colorado, was "Rise Above." Perhaps some interpreted this theme merely by its more obvious reference to the conference location in the Mile High City, but for others, this theme may have had a more significant professional and personal meaning.

According to dictionary.com, the meaning of "rise above" is "to overcome or be unaffected by something mean or contemptible. Universally in the right of way industry, that contemptible force could be the pandemic and its lingering effects, such as the increased projects in the industry, the decline in the number of professionals to perform necessary work, supply chain issues and/or a general feeling of malaise hanging over our nation. For others, like the Jeopardy! game show, this year's conference theme is the answer to a question yet posed. The theme resonates deeply and serves as a guidepost for some leaders, particularly in undesirable circumstances where they would prefer not to find themselves.





At times, some leaders have become unfortunate casualties in others' agendas, tangled in the webs of the selfish promotion of personal interests. Often when people are captured in such situations, they may be blindsided by the actions of someone they respected. This person could have served with one professionally, been a confidante and/or strongly encouraged involvement in professional activities. One could have worked together with this individual to effectively solve client issues or other significant challenges and shared a common devotion to the company or organization, or so one thought.

Certainly, those who have served as leaders for many years are neither neophytes nor naïve when it comes to the force of opposition or disappointment by people. Not everyone will like or support you. Whether professionally or personally, some individuals will let you down. In my almost four decades as a full-time member of the workforce, I have learned that such disappointments are the valleys in the landscape of life. That said, although leaders may expect unsavory conduct from detractors, disloyalty is typically not

anticipated by their trusted advisors. The sense of betrayal can be overwhelming — not only can it leave someone feeling stunned or stabbed in the back, it can be brutally heartbreaking. The realization feels like a slap in the face. It can leave you feeling dispensable or realizing that someone you respected may not have the integrity you thought he or she did.

### Why Do Leaders Sometimes Lose Their Way?

Although the space consumed by such situations may seem dark, the light shed on them can serve as the antiseptic. Like other painful experiences in life, they are wasted if lessons are not extracted from them to apply to the future. Such unfortunate circumstances have compelled me to ask questions. First, why do some leaders lose their direction, stray from the path of professionalism and put personal agendas ahead of the company or group at the expense of others? Second, if you are a leader whom a trusted advisor has betrayed, how should you react?

The first question cannot be answered singularly. Although, as a leader, one hopes that the moral compass of other leaders, particularly those more senior, will be pointed due north, that is not always the case. Egos can obscure the proper direction, and





personal interests are then elevated above the common good. The Machiavellian principle that “the end justifies the means” prevails in pursuit of a personal agenda. But what is misplaced about a lost leader’s reliance upon the Machiavellian principle is that it is only justified when the conduct advances moral good and should not justify the use of influence gained in leadership to advance self-serving agendas, particularly at the expense of someone else.

Aside from an ego that justifies the belief that a personal agenda should be furthered at all costs, another reason that a leader may go astray is because he or she is unduly influenced by someone else more powerful or otherwise influential, or perhaps even worse, by the “pack mentality,” when it just is easier to go with the crowd. Sometimes leaders succumb to the pressure of following a distasteful path even when they know it is not the right thing to do. They may feel pressure from an individual who is more advanced in the company, and that pressure may seem daunting, particularly if the leaders believe that their positions are somehow in jeopardy if they do not act according to the pressure exerted on them. Alternatively, if the pressure emanates from a group, the misguided leader may believe that the group will ostracize him or her, that all his or her diligent efforts made on behalf of the company will be for naught, and he or she will be shunned from the group.

Finally, someone we admired and trusted in business who faltered may never have been the person you thought he or she was. Perhaps you did not know this individual as well as you thought that you did. A blessing.im blog article “What To Do When Those You Look Up To Let You Down,” noted that, “The extent of the depth of our relationships with people is the extent to which we know or do not know their shortcomings.” Sometimes you may not know a business mentor as well as you thought you did, and the values you thought he or she represented are not ones to which he or she actually subscribes. Alternatively, perhaps this person has changed, and for whatever reason, no longer possesses the integrity or commitment to the company that he or she had in the past.

### The Answer is to “Rise Above”

When one has been an injured party in a business leader’s nefarious scheme to advance a personal agenda, perhaps the first instinctive reaction is to retaliate. If this scheme involved other unaware people, one may even feel the need to lash out at them, even if it embarrasses or otherwise adversely affects these people and justify such actions by the need for them



to know the “truth.” However, hurting others who have been innocent pawns in someone else’s plot may, but not always, make one feel better momentarily, but it neither changes past circumstances nor advances positivity — it just harms someone else. If you retaliate against your offender, or perpetuate a grudge, ultimately, the person you harm the worst is yourself. “[I]t’s like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick,” according to Angela Buttimer, a licensed psychotherapist at Thomas F. Chapman Family Cancer Wellness at Piedmont Healthcare.

The answer about how to react in such situations is to “rise above” and take the high road. Television personality Dr. Phil McGraw has commented about taking the high road and said, “There’s a lot less traffic up there.” In the long run, the sage leader knows that it is the good of the group and its mission that should be above all else. The blessing.im blog reminds us that, “At other times the people we look up to champion a cause that is close to our hearts. When those we look up to fail, we must be careful that we do not discredit them and the cause.” [Emphasis in original.] An industry colleague of mine who was shocked to learn of a cherished mentor who had turned coat and become an opposer, summed up it another way: “Although I may be more cautious in the future, it won’t keep me from pouring my heart into the organization.” Always keep the group, whatever it may be, in your heart and maintain your focus on its best interests. 🌟



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