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The value of virtue: 7 reasons why Volodymyr Zelenskyy's crisis leadership has been so effective

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The war in Ukraine would test even the most hardened political operator: millions forced to flee their homes, thousands (including many civilians) killed or injured, evidence of Russian war crimes mounting.

Yet Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a relative novice head of state, has not just risen to the challenge, he has been widely praised and admired for his exemplary crisis leadership. So, what explains this prowess?

Zelenskyy's acting experience has been credited with his ability to connect powerfully with different audiences, using facts and emotions to build support for the Ukrainian cause.

His commitment to serve his people has been called pivotal. He has been described as charismatic – although this alone is no guarantee of success, given charismatic leaders can still lead their nations to destruction.

And it's Zelenskyy's repeated displays of courage that seem to really strike a chord with many. This leads us into the territory of character virtues, which we argue hold the key to Zelenskyy's abilities as a crisis leader.



Dressed in trademark fatigues, Zelenskyy arrives for a press conference in late April. GettyImages

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Over the past few decades, scholars concerned with preventing unethical leadership have developed Aristotle's insights further, using modern social scientific methods.

Read more: [How Zelenskyy emerged as the antithesis of Putin and proved you don't need to be a strongman to be a great leader](#)

Recently, we drew on this knowledge to examine crisis leadership and how character virtues guided 12 heads of state through that first, tumultuous wave of COVID-19. We've used the same approach to analyse Zelenskyy's leadership.

We closely examined an extended filmed interview with Zelenskyy by The Economist. Being unscripted and more spontaneous than his pre-prepared speeches, it offered a clearer insight into his character.

We found all seven of the key character virtues – humanity, temperance, justice, courage, transcendence, wisdom and prudence – evident in Zelenskyy's responses to the interviewers' questions.

Character virtues in action

The virtue of *humanity* relates to care, compassion, empathy and respect for others. Zelenskyy demonstrates this primarily through his focus on protecting Ukrainians from Russian aggression, but it even extends to his enemy's suffering.

Zelenskyy expresses concern that Putin is “throwing Russian soldiers like logs into a train’s furnace”, and laments that the Russian dead are neither mourned nor buried by their own side.

This refusal to simply give way to hate and anger when speaking of his enemies also reflects a second virtue, *temperance* – the ability to exercise emotional control.

Read more: [Why Zelenskyy’s ‘selfie videos’ are helping Ukraine win the PR war against Russia](#)

Zelenskyy’s modesty also reflects this virtue – in the interview he shrugs off praise for being an inspirational hero, preferring to keep to the main issues. Temperance serves to maintain emotional equilibrium, thus enabling Zelenskyy to make difficult decisions in a level-headed manner.

The virtue of *justice* means acting responsibly and ensuring people are treated fairly. It involves citizenship, teamwork, loyalty and accountability. Zelenskyy speaks of his “duty to protect” Ukrainians and to “signal” with his own conduct how others should act. By remaining in Ukraine, he becomes a role model of this virtue while simultaneously demonstrating the virtue of courage.

Zelenskyy’s own *courage* has been widely noted, but we observed that he also repeatedly acknowledges that of his fellow citizens, thereby encouraging them to act with virtue.



Humanity as virtue: Volodymyr Zelenskyy visits a hospital in Kyiv in late March. GettyImages

A formidable opponent

By expressing the seemingly unshakeable hope that Ukrainians will secure victory because of their courage, Zelenskyy demonstrates the virtue of *transcendence* – the optimism and faith that a cause is meaningful, noble and will prevail.

Zelenskyy's views about what motivates other countries display his *wisdom*. In the interview he demonstrates a broad strategic perspective and insight into the varying interests that shape other nations' responses to the war. This helps him craft his appeals to allies, and to Russia, which then have a greater chance of resonating.

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The final virtue, *prudence*, complements that wisdom. It involves an ability to gauge what is the right thing to do and is something of a meta-virtue, guiding the choice of which other virtues are needed from moment to moment. We found repeated instances of Zelenskyy demonstrating just that, weaving together multiple virtues in his responses to questions.

Our analysis of his leadership indicates Zelenskyy possesses strength of character and emotional, intellectual and moral clarity about what is at stake. This explains his effective crisis leadership to date. Despite the clear military mismatch between Russia and Ukraine, Putin has taken on a formidable opponent.

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