

Five Leadership Lessons From Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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Careers

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Today would have been Martin Luther King Jr.'s 90th birthday, and his legacy of service, sacrifice, commitment and faith is upheld as one of the foremost examples of courageous, moral leadership around the globe. His selfless, unwavering dedication to the struggle for civil rights inspires us to have courage, spread truth, create good trouble and to be optimistic that circumstances, people and countries can change for the better. Here are five lessons we can learn from Dr. King's example:

Summon Your Courage

King took up the mantle to lead the civil rights movement knowing it would be met with violence and resistance. Nothing King undertook was easy, and he was confronted with every obstacle imaginable. But his deeply rooted belief that the cause was more important than the dangers and obstacles he faced fueled his courage to lead the movement.

Tell The "Unarmed Truth"

In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, King said he grappled with how he could accept the prize on behalf of a movement that was still engaged in an unrelenting struggle, a struggle that had not won the peace that was the essence of the prize. But he came to the conclusion that the award was for the nonviolent response to harrowing violence and oppression, and said "I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind...I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality." King deeply believed that shining a light on the discrimination and the oppression African Americans suffered by leading nonviolent protests would bring to meaningful, lasting change, and it did. King was right- the truth had the last word.

Get Comfortable With Discomfort

Representative John Lewis, the Congressman from Georgia and the former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, [wrote a tribute to Dr. King](#) for TIME, and wrote about how Dr. King encouraged them to make what Lewis calls "good trouble" by challenging the injustices they encountered. It contradicted what Lewis' parents and grandparents told him, which was to keep quiet and "Don't get in trouble. This is the way it is." It was an incredibly dangerous time to be a vocal civil rights advocate. It takes a lot of courage to be comfortable with the tension, discomfort, anger and violence that comes with change, but staying comfortable never leads to meaningful progress. "I tell friends and family, colleagues and especially young people that when you see something that's not right or fair, you have to do something, you have to speak up, you have to get in the way...Dr. King and others inspired me to get in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. And I think we're going to have generations for years to come that will be prepared to get in trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble," he wrote.

Be Optimistic

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, King explained that the foundation of the civil rights movement, and his personal commitment to it was grounded in optimism. "I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind...I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality," he said.

Lead With Character

[The Harvard Business Review](#) interviewed Bill George, a fellow at Harvard Business School and expert in leadership about Dr. King. When HBR asked him, 'What are the most applicable lessons to leaders today?' Part of his response was to value the process, value how things are done as much as the results you aim to achieve. "In a very real sense, the character you demonstrate in achieving your purpose is the legacy you leave to those leaders coming along behind you," he said.