



by Stefan Shirley

Long before our time, people would gather and discuss philosophical issues such as how to live a fulfilling and virtuous life. During these times of enlightenment, great thinkers like Locke, Kant, Hume, and Kierkegaard, and philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Confucius, and Socrates were laying the foundations for how we think about knowledge, reality, and existence. As an example, and the main focus of this article, Stoicism began with the teachings of Zeno of Citium around 300 BCE and continued for more than 500 years through notable Stoic leaders such as Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Seneca the Younger) (4 BCE - 65 AD), Epictetus (50-135 AD), and Marcus Aurelius (121-180 AD). This philosophy combines lessons from others like Epicurus, Plato, and Socrates but differs in the

individuals motives regarding character. In particular, the Stoics believed that to live a truly good life, one must be virtuous in areas such as temperance, wisdom, bravery, and justice.

Like Stoicism, military leadership demands that leaders possess great character. For many, this requires practicing the Stoic virtues of temperance, wisdom, bravery, and justice. This article aims to summarize each of these virtues and provide examples for leaders to incorporate this ideology in their daily lives.

## **Temperance**

*“Better to trip with the feet than with the tongue.” — Zeno*

Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, realized his fate when his ship sank along with its cargo. He lost everything. Searching for meaning to it all, he began to study the philosophical ideas from Socrates and Crates. From this, he outlined his own ideals underpinned by the belief that “happiness is a good flow of life.” How to achieve this happiness, he surmised, was by living a life of virtue.

Temperance (self-control) is a critical quality for leaders to master. In leadership, we often find ourselves the center of attention (by rank, position, or self-indulgence) and feel the need to pass on our wisdom to anyone who will or is forced to listen. Zeno, however, would advise us to think before we speak. Stephen Covey, author of the [Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#) tells us that we should seek to understand before we seek to be understood.

## **Wisdom**

*“If you don’t know, ask. You will be a fool for the moment, but a wise man for the rest of your life.” — Seneca the Younger*

Seneca understood the value of learning and gaining wisdom. In his book, [Letters From A Stoic](#), he confirms the ethical ideals of Stoicism and the wisdom of the self-possessed person immune to overmastering emotions and the setbacks of life.

We have but one job and that is to learn something new each day. The more we learn about the world in which we live, the better we are at guiding and mentoring our subordinates. David Epstein, author of [Range](#), says “for learning that is both durable (it sticks) and flexible (it can be applied broadly), *fast and easy* is precisely the problem.” Thus, wisdom does not come from taking shortcuts. As leaders, we must put in the hard work.

## **Bravery**

*“First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do.”* — Epictetus

His Greek name, Epictētos, means “acquired” and is a simple reminder that he was born a slave. After having been granted his freedom, Epictetus studied philosophy, became a teacher, and opened his own school in Greece. Epictetus was not a pontificator of ideas but instead a stalwart of action. Marcus Aurelius, Theodore Roosevelt, Admiral James Stockdale, and Albert Ellis were all self-proclaimed readers and disciples of his teachings. This, and the fact that his writings have survived more than 2,000 years should be confirmation of his work.

Bravery is having the courage to do what is right in all instances. In his book [Enchiridion](#), Epictetus asks “How long are you going to wait before you demand the best for yourself?” We cannot wait for someone else to tell us what to do or what kind of a person we should be. Living a brave or courageous life allows us to be a better person today than we were yesterday. Doing so may require the assistance of a mentor or someone who has gone through similar experiences and can help guide us.

## **Justice**

*“The best revenge is to not be like that.” — Marcus Aurelius*

Marcus Aurelius is considered one of the last great Roman Emperors. He constantly challenged himself and wrote down personal development notes. These were his daily [Meditations](#), a journal intended only for himself but eventually published by his widow. As emperor, Aurelius journaled a great deal about justice. He believed nature intended all humans to actively help one another writing “that which is no good for the hive, is no good for the bee.”

For Stoics, justice is defined as the practice of exercising kindness or fairness to all. Aurelius cements this idea in *Meditations*, “[it has] long been proved that we were born for fellowship.” The saying goes that it is lonely at the top and one can only imagine how lonely it must have been for this emperor. Although most of us will never be emperors of a vast empire, we cannot allow ourselves to serve and lead in solidarity. The motivational speaker, [Jim Rhon](#), tells us that we are the average of the five people with whom we surround ourselves. Thus, the courageous act is to surround ourselves with people of extremely high character.

## **Closing Thoughts**

*Man conquers the world by conquering himself.” — Zeno*

I recently visited my 92 year old grandmother in Texas. She told me stories of her life and those told to her by her grandmother. Her memory is truly uncanny and she proves to be a living history book of knowledge and wisdom. She works to share the past by injecting knowledge for future generations who will no doubt outlive her. Through these actions, her legacy will live on.

[Marcus Aurelius](#) wrote, “what we do now echoes in eternity.”

It is for this reason that we should constantly practice temperance, wisdom, bravery, and justice. Being a great leader requires consistency of character. Some of the greatest examples come from the Stoics discussed here within. Only time will tell the impact we had on others. But through intentional practice of Stoic principles, it is my hope that we improve upon the future and its leaders.

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