

Lesson 10: Heroism

PURPOSE

To motivate students to embody heroism in their daily lives.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand the main characteristics of heroism.
2. Understand how heroism and humility are connected.
3. Recognize Nelson Mandela as a person who embodied heroism and humility at the same time.

VOCABULARY

- Heroism: possessing habits of excellence

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- [Video](#) One key leadership lesson everyone can learn from the US Marines
- [The Heroism of Nelson Mandela](#)

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Review the previous lesson. Recall the definition of habits of excellence and the key ideas from the video by Jack Clear. Recall the definition of humility and the characteristics of humble people. Motivate students to continue to practice developing the habit of humility.

Step 2: Explain that in this lesson students will deal with the topic of heroism and how they can embody it. Recall the vocabulary definition of heroism. Write the definition on the board:

Heroism: possessing habits of excellence

Highlight five characteristics of heroism:

Heroes are not born; heroism is developed through the everyday practice of excellent choices.

Heroism is about possessing habits of excellence.

Heroism involves sacrificing for others.

Heroism is not about never making mistakes; it's about always trying to get back on the right track after making them.

Heroes don't become heroes by themselves; every person needs excellent friendships.

Ask the students to comment on each of the traits and if they would add any others.

Step 3: Show the class the [video](#): One key leadership lesson everyone can learn from the US Marines. The U.S. Marines have a rule: "Officers eat last." It's a fundamental philosophy of Marine Corps leadership that officers wait to eat until all Marines beneath them in rank have gotten their food.

After watching the video, ask the students to share their reflections and connect the rule that "officers eat last" with the habit of humility.

After hearing the students' comments, explain that heroism and being a true leader involves humility. The greatness of a leader consists in how powerfully they lead by example. This is practiced every day in a simple way during meals in the US Marine Corps when officers sacrifice their own hunger pangs, to let others eat first. In this small way, the rule exemplifies that regardless of rank, the greatest leader looks after others.

Step 4: Ask students to think about and name a person in their lives who embodies habits of excellence. After listening to the students' responses, introduce the history of Nelson Mandela. Nelson Mandela was born in 1918, in what was then known as the Union of South Africa. Though the majority of its inhabitants were black, they were dominated by a white minority that controlled the land, the wealth, and the government—a discriminatory social structure that would later be codified in the country's legal system and called apartheid.

Many South Africans defied apartheid, through civil disobedience campaigns, national strikes and boycotts. Nelson Mandela joined this struggle as a young lawyer. By the 1950s, he had become a leader in the anti-apartheid movement.

The South African government responded to demands for equality and freedom with repression and violence. They shot and killed unarmed protestors. Restrictions were put in place to take away the few rights that black workers had, including the right to organize and strike. The government outlawed the two main anti-apartheid organizations and then went after its organizers and leaders. The government launched a national manhunt for Nelson Mandela. After eluding capture for 17 months, Mandela was caught, charged with treason and condemned to hard labor. In court, Mandela stood and spoke:

... During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die¹.

Mandela served 27 years in prison. Released in 1990, at 71, Mandela led efforts to negotiate an end to apartheid, which resulted in the 1994 multiracial general election in which Mandela became president. Leading a broad coalition government which promulgated a new constitution, Mandela emphasized reconciliation between the country's racial groups and created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate past human rights abuses. Widely regarded as an icon of democracy and social justice, he received more than 250 honors, including the Nobel Peace Prize.

Step 5: Divide the students into groups and ask them to read, [The Heroism of Nelson Mandela](#). After the groups finish reading, ask students to share their responses with the class. Lead a discussion with the class, using the Teacher's Answer Key provided with the text.

Step 6: Summarize. Recall the definition of heroism and five important characteristics of heroism. Highlight Nelson Mandela as an example of someone who embodied heroism and humility at the same time. Conclude by motivating the students to think about how they can embody heroism and humility through choices in their daily life.

¹ <https://www.facinghistory.org/confronting-apartheid/chapter-2/mandela-trial>

The Heroism of Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela was a great leader. A great number of people in his country followed him and the world leaders held him in high esteem. During a lifetime of resistance, leading to imprisonment, Nelson Mandela led South Africa out of apartheid and into an era of reconciliation. His presidential leadership was not one of revenge, getting even or seeking power. His heroism was born of decades of struggle.

At the same time, Mandela exhibited a deep humility. He showed humility when he stepped down from the role of president after one term, although he could have stayed a president for life. One of his most famous descriptions of himself which also shows his humility is: "I am not a saint unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying." He was definitely a person who was aware of both his strengths and his limitations. He made mistakes. Heroism is trying to get on the right track again after making them.

Heroism is enhanced by excellent friendships. Mandela knew that ending apartheid would never be possible if not for friends, working together in solidarity. "I was in the company of great men," he once said, "some of them more qualified than me." Shortly after he turned 80, Mandela received an honorary doctorate from Harvard. "I know that through this award, you are not so much recognizing any individual achievement, but are rather paying tribute to the struggles and achievements of the South African people as a whole," he said in his address.

He was not centered around himself. As a special guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show, when he came to the studio, he asked the producer what was the subject of tonight's show. "You, sir, are the subject," replied the producer. Mandela couldn't believe he was the subject for the whole hour.

Mandela also embodied different habits of excellence. Perhaps, most notable, was his forgiveness. "Resentment is like drinking poison and hoping it will kill your enemy," he said about his oppressors. He made peace with those who sought to destroy and kill him, starting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as president.

Being humble means that our purpose in life is not to seek power and fame, but to seek how much of a difference we can make in the lives of others. In this way, Mandela's long walk to freedom was a sacrifice for a greater cause. "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

How did Mandela display humility?

How were five characteristics of heroism* embodied by Nelson Mandela?

*Five characteristics of heroism are:

1. Heroes are not born; heroism is developed through the everyday practice of excellent choices.
2. Heroism is about possessing habits of excellence.
3. Heroism involves sacrificing for others.
4. Heroism is not about never making mistakes; it's about always trying to get back on the right track after making them.
5. Heroes don't become heroes by themselves; every person needs excellent friendships.

Heroism and Humility of Nelson Mandela – Teacher’s Answer Key

1. Mandela displayed great humility when he stepped down from the role of a president after one term, although he could have stayed a president for life. One of his most famous descriptions of himself which also shows his humility is: “I am not a saint unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.” He was definitely a person who was aware of both his strengths and his limitations.

Even after becoming famous, he was always insisting that other people should be put alongside, or even before, him. One time he said: “I was in the company of great men: some of them more qualified than me.” Shortly after he turned 80, Nelson Mandela received an honorary doctorate from Harvard at a special convocation. “I know that through this award, you are not so much recognizing any individual achievement, but are rather paying tribute to the struggles and achievements of the South African people as a whole,” he said in his address.

2. Mandela embodies five characteristics of heroism in the following way:
 - His heroism was not born overnight, but he developed it slowly through many years of struggle, and by making excellent choices in day to day situations.
 - He showed that heroism is not about never making mistakes, but rather, always trying to get on the right track after making them. He said: “I am not a saint unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.”
 - He embodied the fact that heroism is enhanced by excellent friendships. He knew that ending the apartheid would never be possible without friends working together in solidarity.
 - He also embodied different habits of excellence. Maybe most notable is the habit of forgiveness. He was famous for rejecting resentment toward his oppressors by saying: “Resentment is like drinking poison and hoping it will kill your enemy.” He made peace with his oppressors and started a Truth and Reconciliation Commission after becoming president.
 - Mandela’s heroism was aimed at sacrificing for others, and not increasing his own importance. His main aim was building peace and transforming his country in a positive way.