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Holding onto the victory after the victory: Leadership lessons from the war in Ukraine for recovery and positive change

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ABSTRACT

Case studies of countries at war are not typically part of the curriculum at business schools. However, such events have lots to offer in terms of leadership. Consider the following: Analysts estimated that the Russian Armed Forces would be capable of capturing Kyiv and removing the Ukrainian government within three days after the start of the full-scale invasion. However, more than three years into the war, Ukrainians have defied this prediction and continue to live through unimaginable hardship with exceptional fortitude. We highlight five main themes from the ongoing war and associated lessons for educational institutions, businesses, and leaders – resilience; fragmentation; grief; critical thinking; and vision – and make the point to never forget about the victory after the victory. Holding onto the victory will be crucial, not only to find a way forward but to keep despair at bay. Purpose, new perspective, and a sense of contributing to something larger can grow out of the need for wartime resilience. A new awareness of and commitment to gender equity can arise from fragmentation. Loss and grief can motivate societal change through post-traumatic growth. And the horrors of war can also serve as a wake-up call that leads to increased education and critical thinking. Such transformation is ongoing and can start now, even before the war is over.

Case studies of countries at war are not typically part of the curriculum of undergraduate and graduate programs at business schools. However, such events have lots to offer in terms of deep, personal leadership and leadership processes. Consider the following: Analysts estimated that the Russian Armed Forces would be capable of capturing Kyiv and removing the Ukrainian government within three days after the start of the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. At the time of writing this article, more than three years into the war, Ukrainians have defied this prediction and continue to live through unimaginable hardship with exceptional fortitude. Their resolve remains unshaken. The full-scale invasion and the horrors of war have bent Ukrainians but not broken them.

The stories emerging from Ukraine as it fights for its life can inspire leadership across many spheres. Specifically, stories can show us (a) experiences that are vastly different than our own, (b) places we will never visit, and (c) people who are completely unlike ourselves. Stories can also open us up to new ways of thinking, to understanding, to compassion, and to vulnerability. They can invoke our sense of justice, our transcendence, and our courage. Stories can be a mirror that allows us to see ourselves or our experiences, beliefs, or thoughts reflected back at us. They make us feel interconnected, grateful, resilient; they give us confidence. Ukraine today can also be considered a social laboratory that offers lessons to the world so that what is happening in Ukraine today does not happen to other countries and populations.

Social changes are happening rapidly in Ukraine. Every half a year, things look and feel different from the previous half a year. For example, many people changed their roles in society very quickly. Those in the military had to do things that they never planned to do, or they had to perform tasks they never imagined they could. Women had to take on many more responsibilities in their lives, and their children were forced to grow up very quickly and, at the same time, to witness a lot of pain in the country. Unfortunately, many families were separated: men left for the front lines and children were abducted or worse. Ukrainians started to see more and more people without limbs, and with prosthetics. People

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were, are, and will be coming back from the front line physically and mentally scarred. And yet these individuals need to be integrated in society.

The fight against the Russian invaders has also decimated many units in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The much-needed reinforcements are few and far between, leaving many fighters exhausted and even demoralized as they battle physical and mental fatigue. How can the soldiers and volunteer forces be inspired to continue to fight and defend Ukraine? Further, the lives and dreams of every Ukrainian have been deeply affected by the war. How will societal leaders come to terms with the damage inflicted on them and yet make the substantive shift of returning to a peacetime leadership approach equipped to rebuild the country?

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we highlight five main themes from the ongoing war and associated lessons for educational institutions, businesses, and leaders: resilience; fragmentation and social impact; loss, grief, and growth; education and critical thinking; and a vision for the future. Second, in doing so, we observe that there is one essential lesson embedded in the war that appears to be highly relevant: we should never forget about the victory after the victory, that is to say, the profound changes and personal and societal growth that can arise from the experience of war and trauma. Third, we ask how Ukrainians can continue with the same energy, focus, and determination for recovery and positive changes in the country, building an inclusive society of free and responsible people after the war. Freedom comes with taking responsibility for our actions. Hence a central question for Ukrainians emerges: How to be a proactive element in the larger ecosystem that is Ukraine?

Lessons from the war: resilience

The first questions many people in Ukraine ask themselves when they wake up each morning are, *Is my team alive? Are my people safe? How are their families?* Nearly 90 % of the 600+ member companies at the American Chamber of Commerce in Ukraine have employees serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Over 45 % of member organizations have had employees killed; and there are many employees who are missing in action and many more who are severely wounded. Millions of citizens were forced from their homes. In addition to the enormous human cost of the war, the economic impact has been devastating for Ukrainians.

Resilience is often conceptualized as a process in which individuals respond and adjust to challenges and change in a positive, adaptive manner. It is an important contributor to well-being. Despite life-shattering events, Ukrainians continue to rally around their national flag, and many remain positive about their future. That is, many citizens and soldiers display the strength and resilience to carry on the fight despite deep personal losses and sustained attacks on the infrastructure that have left millions without heat, electricity, and water.

Two sympatico psychological constructs are often brought to the forefront in explaining these positive feelings: optimism and hope. Gene Alarcon and his colleagues (2013) explained that, simply put, the optimistic person believes that somehow — either through luck, the actions of others, or one's own actions — their future will be successful and fulfilling. The hopeful person, on the other hand, believes specifically in their own capability for securing a successful and fulfilling future. The Ukrainian word for hope is "Надія" – the part "дія" means action. Hope inspires action, initiative, determination, and resilience.

Katina Sawyer and Judy Clair (2022) outline the myriad ways through which hope plays a role in organizations. Their research can be broadly applied to the way that hope operates not only in the workplace, but also in communities organized by nationhood. They explain that hope is made up of three parts. First, organizational members need to have a shared vision for a hopeful future, as part of everyday conversation — they must believe that it is possible to move beyond their current circumstances and achieve more desirable outcomes. Second, organizational members have to believe that they know how to get to their goals via methods and practices that they deem appropriate. Goal achievement will not be straightforward; setbacks will happen and doubt will arise. And third, the organization must embody a shared sense of motivation toward their goals. When times get tough, hopeful organizations believe that they have what it takes to weather the storm. They return to the shared vision and see the relevance of sticking together.

However, it is easy to make the point that hope can backfire. A collective belief of hope is only positive when making progress toward its promises seems realistic. But when events appear to throw things off track, there's a similar emotional contagion, but in a negative direction — when negative emotions reign, organizations become hopeless and grow increasingly more dull and de-energized.

Maybe Ukrainians are "hope-a-holics." The last 1000+ days have been painful. The loss of military aid from the United States under President Trump in an effort to negotiate a quick peace deal was a major blow to the country, but hope demands that people never give up believing in what is worth defending. The question is, where does this hope come from? There are several potential explanations and important lessons for educational institutions, businesses, and leaders.

Everything is at stake

Ukrainians realize the war is an existential fight: if they stop fighting, there won't be a free, independent Ukraine. They have lived under a totalitarian regime that repressed the language, literature, and church, and eliminated large parts of the cultural intelligentsia such as artists, poets, and writers. In the twentieth century, over 15 million Ukrainians were killed. Ukraine faced a genocide in the 1930s: the Holodomor was a man-made famine perpetrated by Joseph Stalin from 1932 to 1933 to annihilate the Ukrainian nation. Borys Gudziak, Metropolitan-Archbishop of Philadelphia of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and President of the Ukrainian Catholic University, put it as follows: "We are seeing this attempt to annihilate the nation once again … many Ukrainians recognize this constant fight: every day you wake up, and it's a fight for your right to live. Ukrainians are emerging from a totalitarian and genocidal legacy."

Olga Onuch and Henry Hale (2018) explained that when Ukrainians went to the polls to vote on the future of their republic in December 1991, more than 92 % of those who voted chose independence. People were willing to come together and to support one another in order to ensure a free, independent Ukraine. This created a shared purpose, where people were aware that their actions mattered. The effects of what people did to save their nation, or to better the lives of Ukrainians, could be seen. They were helping create a place where they would like to live, and they were working toward the well-being and happiness of their children, grandchildren, and future generations of Ukrainians after them. A compelling and shared purpose motivates people to action, even if they have to pay the ultimate price. That core essence that leaders and people formulate as the purpose underlying their actions is the fuel that helps them through all of the unknowns and challenges they will have to deal with in their personal and professional lives.

Leaders inspire hope

Anecdotal and research evidence indicates that people want to look up to leaders, and it is leaders that are keeping people inspired. For example, a 2024 global Gallup study of leadership indicated that hope is the most important quality that followers seek in leaders. Leaders who meet this need can reduce suffering and enhance well-being in those who follow them.

Ukrainian leaders continue to rise to this challenge. When United States officials offered President Volodymyr Zelenskyy the chance to flee advancing Russian troops, his famous response, "I need ammunition, not a ride," became a defining leadership moment. The response exemplified his courage and commitment to the leadership role, resonating with

both Ukrainians and the international community. Zelenskyy sent an unmistakable message to the world: he refused to bend to fear or to prioritize his own safety. Many people, leaders included, will sidestep tough challenges and capitulate to fear in difficult times. But while fear creates feelings of isolation, the opposite is also true. Positive emotions and courage — conveyed through speeches, video recordings, and social media — are contagious.

Similarly, Zelenskyy's wife Olena Zelenska, who has described herself as disliking attention, has put her timidness and fears aside and quickly transformed into a frontline ambassador to rally lifesaving international support for her country. She has become a powerful symbol of hope, focusing her attention on causes including rehabilitation, mental health and resilience, restoration of medical and educational infrastructure, and supporting women leaders in civil society. Zelenska facilitates a process that fosters healing through openly revealing her own humanity, expressing her feelings, and her resolve to make a tangible difference.

The positive relational energy that Zelenskyy and Zelenska created led people to believe they mattered and that they were needed to achieve a purpose: to vigorously defend Ukraine. There were many stories of inspiration that followed. Importantly, people could see these stories very quickly through myriad communication channels. A classic example involves the soldiers on Snake Island, the Ukrainian outpost in the Black Sea. One of the soldiers didn't hold back when threatened by a Russian warship. A Russian officer said, "This is a Russian military warship. I suggest you lay down your weapons and surrender to avoid bloodshed and needless casualties. Otherwise, you will be bombed." The soldier responded: "Russian warship, go f*** yourself." Such defiance served as a boost for morale among Ukrainians.

Inspiration and morale are not confined to traditional leaders — unofficial community leaders can have no less of an impact. Consider what happened in the southern Ukrainian town of Voznesensk. In the early days of the war, Ukrainians managed to repel attacks by Russian forces who were much better equipped. The battles were won by a combination of special forces, regular army, territorial defense forces, and Ukraine's secret weapon: really upset grandmothers. These grandmothers were not only cooking and preparing food for the Ukrainian forces — they were also preparing Molotov cocktails. In fact, they were going out and throwing these incendiary weapons under Russian tanks. This example was seen as a clarion call to fight back against the Russians. Said one of these grandmothers: "Let those Russian s**ts come here … We are ready to greet them … We will beat them … I believe in our Ukraine. I believe in Ukrainian people." Young Ukrainians — boys and girls who were part of military units — were pitching in as well. After attaching explosives to donated consumer drones, they went to the front lines and flew them into the bases of the Russian forces. Without the virtues of accountability, courage, and transcendence as modeled by official and unofficial leaders, as well as heroes and unsung heroes, Ukrainians would likely not have felt as strongly about their ability to stand up to Russian invaders and fight back.

Zelenskyy's leadership has also been enhanced by his skill as a strong communicator. His masterful use of social media to connect with people has been frequent and honest, and it has managed to keep people in Ukraine inspired. He has communicated every single day with both internal and external audiences, answering their questions and keeping them up to date on what is going on inside and outside Ukraine. Highlighting successes, particularly in war, is important to inspire others, and Zelenskyy has recognized this and done it regularly.

Many Ukrainians continue to get emotional uplifts and hope from the armed forces. For example, the carefully planned attack by the Security Service of Ukraine on airfields deep in Russia in June 2025 confirmed to many that Ukraine could use asymmetric engagement and technological solutions in the war to continue to inflict pain on the enemy — on the ground, in the air, and at sea.

Movement and perspective

Many organizations encourage their staff, where possible, to change the scenery because it is hard to witness the constant destruction of your home and immediate environment. One of the authors of this article reflected:

> As I was leaving my apartment on the Friday before Christmas, we had a ballistic missile hit our courtyard and there was a lot of damage done in the area. All the windows had been smashed. The business center is all boarded up. Even in our yard we had the maintenance workers fill this hole where a rocket hit. You see these visuals of destruction every day and it is very important to see, where possible, beauty. Not everyone has been given opportunities to travel; but I think it's important to change the scenery … One of the things we see in our Human Capital Committee is that mental health is an issue. It used to be very much taboo, especially for men. It's really important for leaders to understand and recognize what the strains are on everyday life, how the war has affected people. Consider this: most of the fighters come from non-military backgrounds — they are volunteers. The length and emotional weight of the full-scale invasion takes a psychological toll, especially on those with non-military backgrounds or training.

Changing location when possible helps people retain hope by providing a temporary respite from witnessing the devastation around them. Nature is one of those forces of recovery from stress as well as physical, mental, or emotional exhaustion in our personal and professional lives. For example, as Peter Katz, a Canadian singer-songwriter, reminded us, "Our bodies — when they're in nature, when they're breathing clean air, when they're watching water, when they're inhaling the air of a well-oxygenated forest — bring us to the starting line of being able to do these things that we want to do in our lives, and do them well. And when we're in nature, we literally can relax our nervous systems and access things like creativity and wisdom which, in turn, can provide us with new perspectives. We can access all those things that we can't access when our brains are distracted or triggered."

Clarity of thought and identifying new perspectives are not limited to physical movement; they can be found within oneself as well, through seeking out new experiences and deep reflection. A senior manager in the defense sector shared with us that before the war, every day he was waking up unhappy with his life and what he was doing: selling arms. That changed almost overnight with the start of the full-scale invasion. He became one of the happiest people in his job, because, he said, he had found a purpose: to help Ukraine provide these arms to defend itself. This example also illustrates that individuals can completely lose the core essence of whatever they're doing in life when they are distracted. However, many organizations in the business sector found a renewed purpose — to find ways to boost the economy, to pay taxes to fund programs and the war, and to keep the country from tipping over. Such purpose is a powerful perspective that supports hope and associated positivity. Mentors, coaches, educators, and friends can help individuals uncover their purpose guiding personal and professional aspirations.

The relevance of purpose to organizational performance has been well documented. For example, Claudine Gartenberg and her colleagues (2019) found that high-purpose firms come in two forms: (1) firms characterized by perceptions of meaningful work and high camaraderie between workers, and (2) firms characterized by high clarity from management. Their results indicated that publicly traded firms exhibiting both high purpose and clarity have systematically higher future financial performance, even after controlling for current performance. The results also revealed that this relation is driven primarily by the perceptions of middle management and professional staff rather than senior executives. Taken together, these results suggest that firms with midlevel employees with strong beliefs in the purpose of their organization and the clarity in the path toward that purpose experience better performance. There is a strong parallel with the ongoing events in

Ukraine: in short, in a nation that strongly believes in itself, people are its biggest engine and hope.

In conclusion, seeing the resilience of very different people, in the army, in business, in government, and knowing what ordinary citizens are doing, and the large and small sacrifices they make, gives people hope. This energy to keep going, especially in challenging situations, gives credibility to the famous quote by Napoleon Bonaparte: "A leader is a dealer in hope." Further, many people probably realize that what's happening today will go down in history. These observations are consistent with the research of Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer (2011) who studied factors that contribute to great inner work lives: it is forward momentum in meaningful work that results in positive emotions, strong motivation, and favorable perceptions of the organization, their work, and their colleagues.

Lessons from the War: Fragmentation and societal impact

What is the right thing to do? This is not a trivial question in a country that is at war. Every morning people wake up asking themselves that question. The choices people make in wartime have heightened consequences. What is the right thing to do when people's lives literally depend on your actions?

This vital question is reminiscent of the phrase "moments that matter" introduced by Bruce Avolio and Fred Luthans in their book *The High Impact Leader: Moments Matter in Accelerating Authentic Leader Development*. There are moments in life that truly matter because they either help transform people into exceptional human beings and leaders, or they shape individuals as leaders while providing opportunities to dramatically influence the future.

However, individuals do not always make good choices or display strong judgment, and their influence on the future can be a negative one. One might think that during special or dangerous times, humanity's interconnectedness would reveal itself, and that wisdom would prevail. This is not always the case. Astrophysicist, author, and science communicator Neil deGrasse Tyson noted this when reflecting on the conditions that might cause people to make good choices:

> I was naively thinking that once we realized this [us being interconnected and all being stardust] and saw that we are all in this together, that it might diminish the forces of division that drive geopolitics, and even domestic politics, today. For me, if that does not work to bring peace and harmony in this world, I do not know what will.
>
> I have thought that maybe an alien invasion could bring people together, because if aliens wanted to kill all humans, all the warring factions of humans would want to just defend humanity against the aliens. But we already had that exercise with COVID-19. COVID, a virus, is philosophically equal to an invading alien species, right? It attacks all humans. It doesn't care where you live or what your skin color is. I thought we would all band together, drop our weapons and fight this common enemy. That did not happen. This gives me less confidence than I previously had in whether humans are, in fact, wise enough to be the shepherds of our own fate, and of the future of civilization.

The COVID-19 virus did not bring us together and, in Ukraine, neither has the war brought all of society together. This links to the social transformation laboratory mentioned earlier. This is because deep fragmentations emerged due to the war. The increasing division in societies through polarization and fragmentation along ideological, political, or social lines makes it harder to find common ground and solutions to challenges we face. Two primary fragmentations have emerged in Ukraine during the war.

Those who fought and those who didn't

The first fragmentation is between those who stayed in Ukraine and those who left. Exemplified by the famous the World War I recruitment poster by Savile Lumley, which shows a child asking his father, "Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?", there will forever be a little bit of friction in Ukraine. For example, a deeply personal question people are now asking others is: "So what have you been doing since the Spring of 2022?" Some men left or escaped the country — through swimming across rivers or bribes — and may not necessarily be accepted back after the war.

Today, among those who stayed, it is much more about those who are at the front line and fighting versus those who have never been there. There are also people who are hiding, people who have not left their home in the last year or the last two years, in an effort not to be conscripted and sent to the front lines to replenish the war-battered forces. And while some of the reasons for going into hiding make sense — such as the lack of adequate training — such behavior may not sit well with large numbers of the population because they believe that every citizen should understand the need to fulfill their duties in defending the country. The long-term impact of these fragmentations or divisions in society is yet to be seen. However, many Ukrainians who have been serving since the start of the full-scale invasion consider avoiding conscription as nothing short of treasonous.

There are raw, emotional responses toward those who left Ukraine. It is of course easy to be judgmental of others. It is important to recognize that people may have left for very different reasons. Each person has their own story: for example, it wasn't safe for the children, or families simply didn't have a home anymore. Some of these individuals may return at some point, whereas others may decide to permanently relocate elsewhere. A deeply held sentiment by some in Ukraine is that we need to be pragmatic in recovery. The country will be stronger with those who left — they may have knowledge, skills, resources, strong ties with individuals and organizations, and so forth. There are data that reveal that the very skilled and educated left the country in high numbers. Therefore, Ukrainian citizens need these people probably more than the reverse. How can we entice them to come back, integrate them in a post-war, united Ukraine, and utilize their talents in the rebuilding?

Women and leadership

Another societal fragmentation that has emerged during the war is between men and women. Women continue to be at the forefront of humanitarian aid in Ukraine, but now, major companies in Ukraine are also run by women — Coca Cola, McDonald's, Visa, MasterCard, Pfizer — and they are doing well. Whether as corporate leaders or as forklift drivers in warehouses, women are taking on many roles in business and they inspire others to step up and keep institutions running, with tangible results.

Even before the first missile hit during the full-scale invasion, the war had already started on the digital front. Those working for Google, Amazon Web Services, and Microsoft understood that Russians were attacking. For example, Microsoft was already fighting off these attacks before missiles were fired on the 24th of February 2022. Women played a key role in these efforts. This does not come as a surprise. The strength of women as leaders — as CEOs and in the boardroom — has been well established. Women also perform well in crisis situations.

Is this development of having women at the top positions of the companies in Ukraine permanent? Many men have served in the armed forces and died on the front lines, leaving countless women alone at home, without a partner with whom they can share responsibilities. For many women, stepping into senior leadership roles is challenging because they have other important obligations at home. With their husbands gone, their top priority is to take care of their children. No one really knows what may happen after the war, and things can develop in

very different directions. Men cannot travel internationally because of conscription. In contrast, girls and women can go for international studies, often aided by academic institutions that help them to develop skills in business, management, and leadership. Consequently, they are well positioned in the job market and to take on leadership roles in their communities.

However, United Nations Women's Representative for Ukraine, Sabine Freizer, emphasized that "[t]he full-scale war has pushed an entire generation of Ukrainian women backwards." For example, women's employment has decreased, especially among displaced women; the gender pay gap has doubled; and the burden of unpaid care work is increasingly and disproportionately affecting women. The effects of war-related stress and the mental health crisis cannot be ignored either. Despite these challenges, Ukrainian women are continuing to help lead humanitarian responses and recovery efforts. Women are aid workers, civil society leaders, security professionals, and entrepreneurs — in fact, half of businesses today in Ukraine were founded by women.

The victory here is that Ukraine survived and that women played a profoundly important role, thus the war presents an important opportunity to advance gender equality and to change perceptions of women's leadership. Specifically, Ukraine can develop as a model in the world by rebuilding the country as a gender-equal and gender-responsive society, which may serve as an exemplar to many organizations in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

Lessons from the war: loss, grief, and growth

The trauma caused by the full-scale invasion is immense. Grieving, empathy, and taking care of basic human needs on a daily basis is critical. For example, on September 4, 2024, Lviv was hit by a Russian hypersonic missile attack. 18-year-old Daryna Bazylevych, a second-year Ukrainian Catholic University student, her sisters Yaryna, 21, and Emilia, 7, and their 43-year-old mother Yevhenia were killed while sheltering in the staircase of their residential building. Daryna's father, Yaroslav, is the lone survivor of the strike. The deaths of the three sisters and their mother caused a huge outpouring of grief among people in Lviv and across Ukraine.

Such stories, of which there are far too many, carry significant lessons. Coffins tend to be open at Ukrainian funerals. You physically see the person — a family member, friend, or a colleague — that you knew. More than 80 % of Ukrainians have lost someone close from their circle. Death is very close: you see the person, you put your hands on the cold hand of the body, and that is when you say goodbye to the deceased. Every day, people see losses that are taking place, including parents burying their children, some of whom are 18, 19 years old. Boys who are the children of the people they work with, who volunteered for the armed forces and put their lives on the line for their community and country. They see the reactions of people in church and at gravesites. What does one say to a person who has lost so much? They realize how fragile they are, and how quickly they can lose what they have. Such tragic events offer opportunities to further develop our humility and humanity, two critical aspects of strong, effective leadership.

How do we support people who are grieving? How do we ensure that these are transformations from which people come out stronger instead of broken? A 2002 article by Jane Dutton and her colleagues, largely inspired by another tragedy, namely, the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, reminds us that while empathy can be comforting, it has limited capacity for individual and organizational healing. The authors explained that compassionate leadership involves taking some form of public action that is intended to ease people's pain: to alleviate their own and others' suffering. They argue that such action may inspire others to act as well.

Community is important in Ukraine, in part driven by religion and the nature of the workplace. Hence, it's very important to talk about traditions and rituals in the grieving process. For example, organizations must be prepared to offer the necessary resources and spaces where their members can talk about colleagues and the grieving process, and for people to honestly articulate what they need and how others can help. One of the authors of this article reflected:

> It's interesting — people are hugging each other much, much more often now than they did before. But also, it is important to consider: How do you help people in very simple things? You could take the kids to kindergarten, take a little burden off everyday things. And that's what I'm trying to say to leaders in companies I am interacting with. Now you need to think how you, as a community, are reacting to such situations. How do you support this person? Do you have, for example, a way to remember people who sacrificed their lives? Do you have their photos in the company? Do you communicate with their families? Do you have some traditions to honor them? Every organization needs to establish new types of traditions, traditions that fit them.

For example, at the Ukrainian Catholic University, a memorial scholarship has been endowed to honor Daryna Bazylevych and her family. The Ukrainian Catholic University Foundation worked together with Daryna's father to raise funds that would enable the university to award one annual and one half-year scholarship for two students. They chose to announce the success of the fundraising — thanks to both domestic and international donations, they far exceeded their goal of $100,000 — on the day ahead of what would have been Daryna's nineteenth birthday. The Bazylevych Endowed Scholarship Fund establishes a tradition and an annual tribute to honor Daryna and her family. Head of the Cultural Studies program at UCU Zoriana Rybchynska said, "Because for us, the survivors, the obligation is to remember, to love, and to preserve."

An example from the corporate world can be seen in Maple Leaf Foods, Canada's leading consumer-packaged protein company. In 2008, there was a widespread outbreak of listeriosis in Canada linked to cold cuts from a Maple Leaf Foods plant in Toronto, Ontario. The outbreak resulted in 23 deaths — a traumatic event, for both the families of the victims and the Maple Leaf Foods organization. The organization implemented the tradition of a minute silence every August 23 to remember the event that so drastically changed the organization. Randy Huffman, Chief Food Safety and Sustainability Officer at Maple Leaf Foods, said during a presentation at a Canadian business school, "The victims of this tragedy are allowed to move on, but we as a company are not." He explained that, in the orientation video for Maple Leaf Foods staff, from top level executives to middle management to temporary plant staff, the seriousness of this event is emphasized. "I can guarantee you, you won't find any other major corporate training videos that show a hearse," he said, emphasizing that it's important for new staff members to understand why the organization continues to raise the bar of food safety standards.

Post-traumatic growth and social change

Again, as Dutton and her colleagues (2002) wrote, "When people know they can bring their pain to the office, they no longer have to expend energy trying to ignore or suppress it, and they can more easily and effectively get back to work … getting back to a routine can be healing in itself." There has been a lot of thought leadership and research around the topic of post-traumatic growth — the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises. It is manifested in a variety of ways, including an increased appreciation for life in general and a changed set of priorities of what is truly important: closer, more intimate, and more meaningful interpersonal relationships; an increased sense of personal strength and a new set of possibilities; and a richer existential and spiritual life including a greater engagement with fundamental existential questions.

Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (2004) proposed a model for understanding the process of post-traumatic growth. They argued that social support and disclosure may play a strong role in the

development of post-traumatic growth in several ways. For example, supporting others can aid in post-traumatic growth by providing a way to craft narratives about the changes that have occurred, and by offering perspectives that can be integrated into schema [core beliefs] change.

Narratives of trauma and survival are always important in post-traumatic growth, because the development of these narratives forces survivors to confront questions of meaning and how it can be reconstructed. In telling these stories to others, the emotional aspects of the events and the survivor are usually revealed, resulting in an intimacy that may be surprising. In bereaved parent support groups, group members often talk about the group being their family, because they have revealed more and been accepted more than in any other personal relationship. This process fosters social validation, connectedness, belonging, and reconnection. The narratives of trauma and growth may also have the effect of spreading the lessons to others through vicarious post-traumatic growth. These stories then transcend individuals, and they can challenge whole societies to initiate beneficial changes. Therefore, it is critical for individuals, organizations, and communities to create vessels for conversations and to construct sustaining attachments: valuing others, being valued, and being part of a kindred group.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) also noted that traumatic events happen not only to individuals but also to groups, and through vicarious processes, to communities and countries. Therefore, we might also consider how the concept of post-traumatic growth might be applied to social change in the aftermath of widespread trauma. Socially shared schemas can be challenged and changed by traumas that are widely shared, such as war or economic hardship. Such events may create a discussion about who "we" are in the aftermath of such events and what principles should guide the society going forward.

An example of post-traumatic growth leading to social change is that of Candace Lynne Lightner, the founding president of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Lightner founded MADD after her 13-year-old daughter, Cari, was killed by a multiple repeat offending impaired driver in 1980. The mother-turned-activist not only led the movement that made impaired driving socially unacceptable, she also became a leading victim's advocate, teaching victims and survivors how to fight for justice in the courtroom. Lightner instigated a wide effort in the United States to eliminate impaired driving, resulting in not only legal changes, but socially shared recognition of the dangers of this activity, a stigma about it, and even a new language including such terms as "designated driver." Lightner has been credited with saving more than 400,000 lives. Armed with her anger and passion, she set out to change the system and the prevailing attitude of societal acceptance about the most often committed crime in the United States.

With these kinds of determined leaders who wish to transform their own experiences of trauma and the vicariously experienced trauma of others, there can arise mutual support among those with similar experiences, and in such support there can be important social change.

Lessons from the war: education and critical thinking

Education is key because — as was mentioned earlier — Ukrainians cannot lose the victory after the victory. Many educational institutions have undergone change before and during the war. The Ukrainian Catholic University is an example because it explicitly focuses on the formation of people. Programs focus on how to become successful in life; but, importantly, they also foster conversations how to be better human beings. That means many things, including how to help people heal wounds in themselves and others. University President Gudziak said:

> … we seek to offer an education and a formation that is holistic, that sees the human being not only as a brain to be programmed, but as an integrated human being with mind, soul, body, and spirit. I believe that, today, the community atmosphere of Ukrainian Catholic University and its programs are a model not only for higher education, but for many public, private, and not-for-profit sector institutions across Ukraine.
>
> I tell students: I hope the university prepares you for good family life because family life is a challenge, and many children today are scarred by the wounds received in their families. We hope individuals are open to something that will give them a more holistic vision, understanding, and, hopefully, competence in life that benefits families, communities, and Ukraine.

A main issue in education is how to make hard decisions based on evidence rather than convenience or emotion, and decisions whose long-term implications have been well thought out. We see populist leaders who appear to focus on short-term decisions in a complex environment. However, critical thinking or judgment has always been a core function of educational institutions: to educate people so that they can meaningfully contribute to society — by contributing to a more enlightened society, by creating a more critical and reflective society, and by helping their country to be viewed more competitively worldwide.

The erosion of critical thinking skills has been steadily encroaching. In 2020, David Garvin of the Harvard Business School told *The New York Times*, "I think there's a feeling that people need to sharpen their thinking skills, whether it's questioning assumptions, or looking at problems from multiple points of view." Many others have echoed similar views and warned us that we are losing touch with these critical skills.

Perhaps we collectively lost our critical thinking as societies because for the most part we lived well, or more-or-less well, despite our challenges. We may have lost a bit of critical thinking, and yet to paraphrase author and executive adviser John Baldoni, in a world of exponentially growing uncertainty, one thing is certain: the need for critical thinkers who can quickly size up situations, realize the upsides and advantages where others may not, through prompt, decisive decision making. A 2024 survey involving three professional schools at Harvard revealed that 54 % of faculty surveyed said they explicitly taught critical thinking in their courses; 27 % said they did not; and 19 % were unsure. Additional data led the researchers to conclude that faculty should be required to teach critical thinking explicitly.

This reflection is what Ukrainian Pastor Gennadiy Mokhnenko shared with us a few months into the full-scale invasion:

> I think this brutality, maybe it sounds strange, but it is like a shake for our world. You know, a big part of the world is very comfortable, very safe, very rich. They have enough food, good medicine, they can travel and have adventure. They are peaceful, nice, joyful. I think that a crazy time like now, it's like a shake.
>
> I think Western leaders, they are like sleeping leaders now. Everything is so good, so nice, and people must be nice, people must smile, and just … talk about good things.
>
> Reality is sometimes very evil … now I saw Western leaders wake up. Just in the last few weeks, they say, "Oh, no, no," when they saw so openly the genocide. This is real genocide: my city, just in my city, they killed nobody knows how many. Maybe 20,000? Maybe 30,000? Maybe 40,000? Nobody knows. They killed people, they raped people, they torture people right now in my city. The twenty-first century! It's a shock! Sometimes we need shock therapy to get back to reality.
>
> … Two days ago, we had Easter. I went to the soldiers, and one pastor joined me. He got guns. He said goodbye to his church, and he went with his son to the front line. He gave me a present: this magazine [for a gun]. This is my Easter present for me from the pastor.
>
> Let me say when I saw it, I said, "Many leaders in my country are waking up right now."
>
> Many of them are sleeping so good through these years. That pastor told me, "Gennadiy, in nine years, war was so far from my home and I

didn't think so much about it." Now, he had a leader's decision. He said, "I'm a man, I have a son, and me and my son will go to the army to stop this evil thing in my country."

This is the real leader's answer: go inside the problem and try to stop it. I think this is a good influence — this war — for leadership.

Critical thinking requires a sharp knife. But the knife today is blunt. To paraphrase author and philosopher Bruce Calvert, believing is easier than thinking; hence, there are so many more believers than thinkers. It is clear that we need critical thinkers to build more just, prosperous, and sustainable futures in communities and societies. This is the role of education.

Canada is one country that has come up against the need to think critically about its society and its education systems in order to repair damage and move forward in positive ways. This was highlighted during the official run of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada from 2008 to 2015.

The Canadian government has been accused of many atrocities directed against the Indigenous peoples that share its lands. During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, its chair, the late Honorable Murray Sinclair, was vocal about how education was critical to walking on the journey of reconciliation. He continuously reminded the audiences that it was the education system, through the creation of residential schools and other government policies, that deliberately and systematically abused First Nations, Métis and Inuit children across the country. Canadians and Indigenous peoples live with the legacy of a racist and assimilationist education system. Despite the many challenges that Indigenous peoples face, Sinclair reminded his audiences that "Education is the key to reconciliation. Education got us into this mess, and education will get us out of it. Education is the means by which we will be able to fix this" and that "… if we make a concerted effort … then eventually we will be able, some day, to wake up and, to our surprise, find that we are treating each other in a way that was intended when contact was first made."

Interestingly, at Ukrainian Catholic University, there has been a huge request for online courses in Ukrainian history since 2022, because many of the students were taught post-totalitarian Soviet history. And now they are interested in Ukraine and its history. Spanish philosopher George Santayana is credited with the aphorism, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." This means that hard-won lessons from past events may not always ward off failures or tragedies in our lives, but they can provide insights into the present and even the future. And yet, in Ukraine, Russia is targeting education because education is about the future and Russia does not want Ukraine to have a future: as of May 2025, 3798 educational institutions have suffered bombing and shelling – and 365 of them have been destroyed completely.

Judgment and the associated critical thinking skills are essential for leaders to successfully navigate a complex and uncertain environment in which they operate. When you have good judgment, you make sound decisions in a timely manner, based on relevant information and a critical analysis of the facts. You appreciate the broader context when reaching decisions. You show flexibility when confronted with new information or situations, and you have an implicit sense of the best way to proceed. You can see into the very depth of challenging issues, and you can reason effectively in uncertain or ambiguous situations. In the workplace, challenging or highly consequential issues can arise at any time. Those who lack critical thinking skills may be prone to making decisions based on faulty assumptions, biases, or incomplete information. Consequently, poor decisions may result, leading to performance problems for leaders, organizations and related stakeholders. Therefore, cultivating judgment or critical thinking skills must be a top priority for any leader — locally, regionally, and nationally.

Lessons from the war: unity and vision for the future

Andy Hunder came to Ukraine in 1996 and noted that he has never seen people in Ukraine as united as they are now. There is a clear sense of identity about who Ukraine is. Ukrainians continue to show that even under the most challenging circumstances — ruthless, deadly strikes with drones and missiles — life does not stop. Throughout the embattled country, people are working relentlessly to restore and maintain essential services, rebuild damaged power grids and infrastructure, care for their fellow citizens, and ensure that education continues.

Some have argued over the last couple of centuries that the understanding of Ukrainian history was a bit foggy. However, the war may cement the nation. Yet many people are wondering what will happen after the victory of Ukraine. Making the substantive shift of returning to a time of peace where leaders and citizens must rebuild and regenerate the country will require a clear and united vision. Said Hunder:

> There are all kinds of temptations to go back to some of the old ways, including ways that were corrupt. We need to be clear and ask ourselves what the right thing is. I think there will be those that say, well, here's a shortcut … let's do this and generate some short-term gains.
>
> I think the message is that we're not out of the woods yet. We have a really, really tough six months ahead where there will be a lot of arm-twisting on all sides. I think people will be asking Ukraine to make big compromises. The question is, then, at what stage do you say, "yes" and at what stage do you say, "no" to these compromises.
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> There will be a lot of difficult, unpopular moves ahead, especially as we prepare for the biggest recovery of a nation in Europe since the Second World War. We need to get ready for that. The people that will be in government after the war, who are responsible for the infrastructure and many other portfolios, are going to face challenging situations. We need to find champions, people who will be inspired by the recovery of the country and the opportunities that are ahead of us to create a better, stronger country for future generations. The rebuild, and the work that is involved across all sectors, is so much based on trust because we do expect that a lot of money is going to be needed for the recovery. And so, again, the most fundamental question that requires strong judgment will be: What is the right thing to do?

The question of doing the right thing is of course an issue that many organizations are also struggling with — perhaps more so today than ever before. Organizations operate in complex environments involving myriad stakeholders. The challenge for any organization is that each stakeholder will declare different and often opposing interests and views about what is of value to them. When the interests of stakeholders are not aligned, leaders are required to make difficult trade-offs, often in highly charged situations, including but not limited to human rights abuses, climate and energy transition, and AI and digital transformation. Such trade-offs or choices require at least two things: (a) a skillful examination of the situation to grasp the essence of the challenge, and (b) logical reasoning based on relevant information and critical analysis of facts to determine the requisite action. Leaders cannot capture short-term gains at the expense of longer-term prospects. This underscores the notion that a leader's most important role in any organization is to make good judgments: well-informed, wise decisions that produce desired outcomes. To achieve the vision of creating a sustainable, thriving world, leaders need strength of character if they are to have the judgment necessary to balance legitimate, urgent, and competing stakeholder interests.

The victory after the victory

It is the belief in victory that keeps Ukrainians committed to fighting the invaders and moving forward. And, at some point, the war will end.

But what does victory really look like? The collapse of Russia because of a mismanaged economy, which is suffering from unsustainable war spending, growing inflation, and significant labor shortages? To get all the land back, including Crimea? A just peace, one that deters further Russian aggression and punishes war crimes? To simply survive the atrocities and keep the country together? What is realistic to hope for?

There is no consensus among international experts of a potential collapse in Russia. And while Ukrainians remain cautiously optimistic about reclaiming their land, many pieces will need to fall into place — including many beyond the control of Ukraine — for such a scenario to unfold. And, importantly, what is realistic for now may not be desirable or even popular for Ukrainians.

We haven't seen many leaders — politicians in particular — brave enough to raise this critical question. Why not? Perhaps politicians are afraid to lose their standing among their constituents. Elections matter. Politicians and those interested in running for political office to make a difference in their community may simply wait for the end of the war and subsequent elections; for now they won't risk making potentially unpopular statements. And yet strong leadership in all sectors and at all levels implies that leaders should not be afraid to have honest and vulnerable conversations about the future of the nation in a complex, divisive world.

The former Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine's armed forces, retired General Valery Zaluzhnyi, may be an exception in articulating his forward-looking ideas. He delivered a speech in Kyiv on May 22, 2025. He said, "I hope that there are not people in this room who still hope for some kind of miracle or lucky sign that will bring peace to Ukraine, the borders of 1991 or 2022, and that there will be great happiness afterward." He also mentioned that only technology-driven warfare can overcome the resources that Russians have access to.

What is certain is that Ukrainians have tempered their expectations for a quick resolution of the war, and what a post-war scenario may look like. Three years of war have taught people not to be too optimistic but to still stay hopeful.

Holding onto the victory after the victory will be crucial, not only to find a way forward but to keep despair at bay. Purpose, new perspective, and a sense of contributing to something larger can grow out of the need for wartime resilience. A new awareness of and commitment to gender equity can arise from fragmentation. Loss and grief can motivate societal change through post-traumatic growth. And the horrors of war can also serve as a wake-up call that leads to increased education and critical thinking. Such transformation is ongoing and can start now, even before the war is over.

Proactive citizens and rebuilding for the future

We need leaders who are able to articulate a vision for the future and who have the courage to express ideas, especially during uncertain if not traumatic times. Generic, fuzzy aspirations contribute to lack of direction, frustration, and poor motivation — all leadership failings in crisis situations. Former United States General and Secretary of State Colin Powell wrote in his book *It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership*:

> Good leaders set vision, missions, and goals. Great leaders inspire every follower at every level to internalize their purpose, and to understand that their purpose goes far beyond the mere details of their job. When everyone is united in purpose, a positive purpose that serves not only the organization but also, hopefully, the world beyond it, you have a winning team.

This sentiment applies in political life as well as in business, and underscores the point that we need visionary, courageous leadership — leaders who bring critical, long-term thinking rather than self-interest to the leadership role in finding a way forward. This is a tall order since this kind of leadership is not always rewarded. For example, Paul Volcker served as chairman of the United States Federal Reserve from 1979 to 1987. He ended the high levels of inflation through the 1970s and the early 1980s; inflation reached a peak in March 1980. Volcker aggressively raised the federal funds rate in 1981 and the national unemployment rate rose to over 10 %. To many observers, his measures were simply what had to be done to tackle inflation. However, it came at a great cost, especially for the middle class. Natalie Jaresko, former Minister of Finance in Ukraine, has been credited with saving the country from economic oblivion in 2015. She too had the courage to make tough, short-term decisions that were painful yet necessary in reconstructing Ukraine's sovereign debt. Acts of leadership are consequential. And to lead with courage and conviction in a world of unknowns and trade-offs makes the role of leadership so hard. Therefore, in an era of converging crises and challenges — geopolitical conflict, the direct and collateral damage of national and international conflict, human rights, climate change, global health, economic uncertainty, social unrest, and Indigenous reconciliation — we need leaders who engage with stakeholders critically, ethically, and imaginatively to build a more just, prosperous, and sustainable future.

Many observers understand that the end of the war — however it will end — is by no means a happy end that will come without hard work. It will be a challenging and tireless undertaking to overcome the myriad challenges, some of which we described in our paper: fostering hope, showing forward momentum, dealing with fragmentation and conflict, enhancing collaboration among stakeholders, post-traumatic growth, critical thinking and education, and leader judgment in building a sustainable and united post-war society.

The Ukrainian people continue to show remarkable resilience and a commitment to build a better future, one based on dignity and freedom. Achieving freedom comes with taking responsibility for our actions in the larger ecosystem that is Ukraine. The fight for freedom will test the character of the nation, defined by the collective behaviors and subsequent achievements of its people. Character, of course, is an essential component of good, effective leadership. It also applies to citizenship – where are those citizens, or the unsung heroes, who have strength of character, strive to make a difference, and contribute to the flourishing of teams, organizations, communities, and societies through reason and judgment? Recent crises such as the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, COVID-19, and the ongoing international humanitarian tragedies have starkly displayed the importance of character. Character is a potent differentiator in agency and hence it should be discussed, developed, and celebrated in people.

Many Ukrainians are seeking a doorway to a better destination, a better future, a ray of hope. Inevitably, they are looking for individuals — leaders, colleagues, friends, family — who can provide direction and bring others along on the journey toward freedom and dignity. So, how does character fit in?

One way is through the character dimension of transcendence, which is the ability to always bring and promote a forward-looking perspective and a sense of optimism despite the inevitable challenges — today and in the future — that are being faced.

Through courage: To be brave enough to put one's leadership on the line; to be determined, resilient, and confident in spite of the unspeakable, unimaginable suffering and the challenges people are encountering.

Through temperance: To bring a sense of calmness and composure because people understand that their words, emotions and behaviors — good or bad — are contagious and can spread like wildfire in a group. Hence, the question: do my actions support or undermine the vision and resulting direction of the people I lead?

Through collaboration: To develop a deep sense of connectedness with the people around you, as diverse as they may be; to bring a sense of collegiality and open-mindedness to build results together.

Through humility: To being open to learning, especially in challenging, unfamiliar or new situations. But take note: being humble requires you to be reflective. Because it is foolish, arrogant, or even dangerous to believe that you alone have all the answers in the most dire, unpredictive situations. As a leader, your job is to bring people

together — to be a host — and then help to facilitate a good decision and to identify proper processes that will lead to favorable outcomes.

To do so will also require individuals to bring both humanity — compassion, empathy — and justice. This means, among other things, that individuals understand that people are fallible, that they offer opportunities for people to learn from their mistakes, and that they give them an opportunity to work toward solutions for a better future.

The future needs people with integrity to help find principled solutions that will help Ukrainians navigate, solve or prevent the social, economic, and environmental crises we are and will be facing; people with the courage to bring candor and transparency to the conversation so the ultimate decision makers can make good, honest decisions. Without candor and transparency, good decisions will remain elusive.

And, lastly, all of these dimensions of character are fundamental to developing good judgment; to facilitating sound decisions in a timely manner based on relevant information, the consideration of all stakeholders, the critical analysis of facts, and the broader context in which decisions are made; and, for people to reason effectively in uncertain or ambiguous situations.

Conclusion

We can all benefit from the wisdom of Samwise Gamgee, from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, who serves up words that seem especially relevant today. As they travel through a war-torn landscape, Frodo starts falling into despair over doubts that he can do what's required, and Samwise inspires him to fight the good fight: "It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going, because they were holding on to something. That there is some good in this world, and it's worth fighting for." The challenges that Ukrainians faces rival anything Tolkien could imagine. It's time for leaders — those in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors — to show that great stories about what really matters in life including freedom and dignity can exist beyond fiction.

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Andy Hunder: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Gerard Seijts:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Sophia Opatska:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Andrew Rozhdestvensky:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing interest

We declare that no potential competing interests exist in writing and submitting our manuscript *Holding onto the Victory After the Victory: Leadership Lessons from the War in Ukraine for Recovery and Positive Change.*

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.