
LEADING THROUGH DISRUPTION



Leadership Starts with Responsibility | Oleksandra Matviichuk

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Oleksandra Matviichuk, Head of the Center for Civil Liberties and Nobel Peace Prize Winner (2022) shares her key lessons on how true leaders take responsibility with [Dr. Anastassia Lauterbach](#) in this [Leading Through Disruption](#) interview.

Lauterbach: Could you please describe your journey, highlighting the most important moments that influenced your actions and choices?

Matviichuk: When I was in school, I got acquainted with Ukrainian dissidents. The dissidents' movement was a movement of intellectuals in the Soviet Union who peacefully protested for human dignity, the right to have their own opinions, and freedom of speech. They were jailed and subjected to forcible psychological treatments. Some of them were killed. Still, they had the bravery to continue fighting against the totalitarian Soviet machine. Being among such people as a child inspired me to study law and start fighting for freedom and justice.

As my family was poor, I began to work very early. I dreamed about a successful commercial career while doing something good for society. I would have achieved this dream if I had been born in Switzerland or Germany. But I was born in Ukraine. When President Yanukovich tried to centralize power, I witnessed how people got prosecuted across the country. I decided to stop my career in a bank. Business in the traditional sense of this word wasn't possible in such circumstances. Since then, I focused only on human rights defense.

During the Revolution of Dignity, my team and I created a civil initiative to support those in need. We united several thousand to provide legal and other assistance for prosecuted protesters. Hundreds and hundreds of people were beaten, arrested, tortured, and accused in fabricated criminal cases. I witnessed with my own eyes that there was a price to pay just for a chance to build a country where everybody's rights were respected.

After February 2014 – when Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine and supported separatists in the Donbas region – and in the first years of the war, we concentrated on the legal practice of detention, sexual violence, torture, and killing of civilians in the occupied territories, as well as politically motivated criminal prosecutions. After February 2022, when Russia started a large-scale invasion, we faced an unprecedented amount of war crimes. We reunited efforts with dozens of regional organizations. We built a joint database with over 9000 search results for crimes committed. It might appear a huge number, but this is only the tip of the iceberg. Russia used massive fear to break people's resistance and intimidate witnesses to win the war.

Lauterbach: The world knows the Ukrainian Revolution as a Revolution of Dignity. Why did Ukrainian people choose this term?

Matviichuk: Dignity is a deep feeling that pushes you to fight for freedom, even when the law doesn't work. There was a sociological survey about what people value most. Ukrainians put liberty in the first place. This made them different from the Russian people. Freedom starts with dignity.

Lauterbach: The Revolution of Dignity wouldn't have been possible without individual stories of those who weren't CEOs or high-ranked military. How do you explain that many ordinary people stepped up and led the way?

Matviichuk: I was reflecting on this question for some time. While I was a student, I also read a lot of business literature.

The authors of management books described different tools and situations that everyone could understand and think about how to apply. How do you become effective? How do you develop leadership skills? And then, life happened. I understood that leadership was not about time management or any other framework.

Leadership starts with responsibility. Yesterday, I met with children in a school, and they asked me what leadership was. I said: 'Imagine that you pass by a street and see some rubbish which isn't yours. You could have said – this wasn't my job – but you stopped and started cleaning it. Your friends, family, and strangers might have seen what you were doing. They might have asked the question of 'why.' Why care at all? When you realized you didn't have a choice but to be responsible, you became a leader.'

Responsibility is what we lack in the current world. Business literature pushes the world into overfocusing on skills and knowledge, but leadership is always ethically driven. Commitment to responsibility and ethics makes leaders out of ordinary people.

Lauterbach: Are ethics a universal term and framework?

Matviichuk: Ethics is universal. There is a Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN. There are legal norms ingrained in international treaties. When you look into the roots of these regulations, you see rights to life or freedom of religion. This comes from universal ideas about what it means to be a human. These ideas are engraved in so many cultures, being nurtured by myths and fairy tales of different nations. Ethics is derived from these ideas. It is about treating others with dignity and respect. Authoritarian dictators prefer talking about ethics and rights as something artificial, something that might be foreign to the society they oppress. In their regimes, human beings are instruments or pieces of a machine designed to promote support for whatever authoritarians define as their goals.

Lauterbach: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was born after the Second World War. Could you reflect on that moment in our past and bridge to what happens today?

Matviichuk: Let us consider the creation of the UN peace and security system first. It was based on a truly revolutionary idea. Before the Second World War, just the mere thought that the international community could interfere in the internal affairs of a state was so radical that people believed it could never happen. Even if this state massively violated human rights wasn't enough to call for a profound change. After the Second World War, people understood that an oppressive country doesn't just go after their own citizens but endangers peace in the entire world. Political leaders were so shocked by the millions of deaths and destruction that they started to think about responsibility not for themselves, not for their political parties, and even not only for their countries but on the scale of the entire planet. One understands during such a war that, many things one considered important weren't important at all. Only several things in life have profound meaning and deserve to fight, live, and even die for.

And this is something that Ukrainians experience day by day. The problem is a disconnect between our strange normality of being at war and others experiencing relative safety, not thinking that terror might knock on their door as well.

We live in an era of turbulence. The UN system of peace and security is not working. First, the cracks were visible only to people in Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Nicaragua, Sudan, and Somalia. But now, in Ukraine, deficiencies are visible for those living in developed democracies that guarantee human rights and security even without pressure from international law.

The previous system gifted some states with unbelievable privileges that can be misused. You see how Russia is vetoing necessary steps and blocking the whole system. Turbulences are getting more and more intense. There is a territorial dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the bloody and horrible events in the Middle East. The president of Venezuela conducted a referendum and publicly disclosed that they would occupy Guyana. There is a looming threat from China to Taiwan. I don't know what historians of the future will call this period – an era of turbulence or the beginning of the Third World War. What is really frustrating is that political leaders behave like little children. They believe no one can see them if they push the palms of their hands against their eyes, preventing themselves from seeing. They are fully exposed, of course, but the sense of false security seduces them into not prioritizing things properly. So, there is no adequate response to threats. If you have a runny nose, you can't treat it by doing push-ups. You must accept having the flu, go to a doctor, and get treated. The same thing applies to wars. You don't treat them by going to the gym. It is time to take responsibility not just for oneself but for everyone. Our children rely on it.

Lauterbach: How do you cope day by day while doing your job?

Matviichuk: I am an optimist by nature. I spent over 20 years fighting for human rights. Pessimists can't survive in my field.

There is no easy answer to the copying question because, as a human being, it is always tricky to face human pain day by day. As a student, I couldn't have imagined dealing with criminal law, but this has been on my agenda for over ten years. Documenting Russian war crimes wasn't my choice. I just had to respond to a challenge.

There are two things that provide consolation and keep people like me going. First is the acknowledgment that there is no such thing as a lack of immediate results. The Ukrainian dissident movement was happening in the sixties. People were jailed. Their careers were broken, and their lives were destroyed. People were killed. From a short-term perspective, one could have considered their movement a failure. But Ukraine is an independent country today. We are all standing on the shoulders of those protesting decades ago.

The second thing is the example of ordinary people who started to do extraordinary things. This is very inspirational because when you see the story of the crystal generosity of your human commute when people risk their lives to save those whom they have never met before. In such a moment, you understand what it truly means to be human.

Lauterbach: What makes ordinary people do extraordinary things?

Matviichuk: Such things aren't demand-driven. Dramatic times provide people the opportunity to express their best features. We have so many extraordinary – ordinary people in the Ukraine because they made a choice. You can't ever choose the country in which you are born or when you are born, but you can decide how to respond to a challenge.

Lauterbach: How do you move from the acute response to challenges in war to the times of reconstruction? Can you keep the momentum?

Matciichuk: The problem is that we have no idea whether we're in the middle of a war, at its end, or just at the beginning. Russia will spend 40% of its budget next year on the military. History teaches us that Ukraine won't be their last stop. We have no luxury in starting the recovery process after the war as we want to be alive when it ends. We must begin the recovery process now. People-to-people connection is a vast dimension in this equation. It is not about waiting to work with the national government. It is about taking the initiative into your own hands. People can fund schools in Ukraine. They can rebuild businesses. They can donate to implement development projects and share their skills with local communities. There are millions of ways to help recover a country during a war.

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This interview on how true leaders take responsibility was conducted for **Leading Through Disruption**, a series featuring powerful conversations with prominent leaders on navigating this era of relentless change. Leading Through Disruption is led by The ExCo Group's Managing Director of EMEA, **Anastassia Lauterbach**.

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