

CHARACTER COUNTS!

BY WES FRIESEN

If recent history teaches us anything, it's that ethics and character count, both in corporate and non-profit organizations. I have suffered from the poor character of others; what about you? Good character is especially important for those of us in leadership roles. Researcher Sam Walker studied successful teams and concluded that the most crucial ingredient in a team that achieves and sustains success is the character of the person who leads it. Respected leadership professors Kouzes and Posner found that the most important trait of a successful leader is character, especially the attribute of integrity.

I recently came across a study by the leadership consultancy firm KRW, measuring the impact of CEOs with high character vs. those with low character. First, let's define what qualifies as high-character. Four moral principles were identified in such a leader: integrity, responsibility, forgiveness, and compassion. In regard to overall corporate performance, CEOs possessing these qualities had an average return on assets (ROA) of 9.35% over a two-year period. CEOs identified as having low character only scored 1.93%. Therefore, high-character CEOs had a stunning five times the ROA of low-character leaders! Sadly, low-character leaders appeared to have alarmingly low self-awareness. They seemed to be the last ones to know of their deficiencies. When low-character leaders rated themselves, it was usually much higher than their employees rated them.

Conversely, when high-character leaders rated themselves, it was usually much lower than their employees

rated them. What we learn from these self-evaluations is that high character is intricately tied to humility. The best CEOs did not fully realize the positive impact they were making on their teams. I suggest this study is relevant whether we are a CEO or a supervisor of a small team. In other words, when we develop high-character traits, the data shows that not only will we personally benefit, but our team and organization will perform at an exceedingly higher level as well.

How Can We Cultivate Our Character?

Can we cultivate and further develop our character? Fortunately, the answer is yes! But developing our character is not a given, and our character can actually decline. But here are eight strategies we can use to further develop our character:

1. Be intentional about character development. I suggest that being intentional about prioritizing our character is a good starting point. An Irish proverb says, "Better to be a man of character than a man of means." Author Les Brown echoes a similar sentiment, "In the end, it is the person you become, not the things that you achieve, that is most important." Stephen Covey taught, "Primary greatness is on the inside. It's about character."

2. Make it a life-long journey. Heraclitus once said, "Good character is not formed in a week or a month. It is created little by little, day by day. Protracted and patient effort is needed to develop good character." I would agree. Viewing character development as more of a marathon than a sprint can help us keep moving even when we stumble along the way. That being said, I want to keep my

stumbles small as respected leadership Warren Buffet warned when he said, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."

3. Define and stay true to our values.

One of the university courses I teach is business ethics. One assignment I give is for the students to define their most important values and the key approaches they want to use to make "grey area" ethical decisions. There are a lot of worthwhile values for us to consider embracing (such as the four previously mentioned in the CEO study, and potentially many others — love, justice, peace, etc.). The recommendation is to narrow down our top five to 10 values. We can go on to identify key criteria for making decisions, such as following the Golden Rule (treating people positively like we would like to be treated), loving others as we love ourselves, and seeking to serve and add value to people. I agree with Roy Disney when he said, "It's not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are."

4. Guard what we feed our minds on. Early in my career I was taught the concept of GIGO ("Garbage In, Garbage Out") — which can be applied to a variety of business applications (e.g. bad assumptions used to build budgets lead to bad budgets). But the concept of GIGO can apply to us in terms of what we allow to feed our minds on — things we watch, things we read, things we think most about. Saint Paul gave this advice, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, fix your thoughts on such things."

5. Practice spiritual disciplines. Many leadership experts like Maxwell, Blanchard, Covey, and others tout the value of practicing spiritual disciplines. Included would be regular times of prayer, meditation, and slowing down to reflect. Also, it's valuable to drink deeply from character-building books like sacred texts from your religious organization (I just finished a study of the Gospel of John from the Bible) and other classics like Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search of Meaning*. It's also helpful to find a faith community where people are supporting, encouraging, and holding each other accountable.

6. Keep company with high-character people. The reality is that we are

significantly influenced by the people we spend the most time with. Personal development expert Jim Rohn taught that "You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with." My philosophy is to be friendly with everyone I encounter, but be careful with respect to who my closet friends are.

7. Solicit ongoing feedback from others. Seeking guidance and feedback from trusted mentors, advisors, and others that care about us is very helpful. Recently, I was at a staff meeting and spoke out against an idea. The next day a trusted leader called me and gave me some constructive feedback which I needed to hear (in hindsight, I realized I had spoken out emotionally, not calmly and rationally). It was humbling and I ended up apologizing — but it was important to help me develop and demonstrate the character I desire. Other tools to gain feedback include participating in surveys and asking for feedback in some of our one-on-one meetings.

8. Learn from our life experiences — and the experiences of others. I

appreciate this quote from Nick Vujicic, who was born without arms or legs. He said, "Your character is formed by the challenges you face and overcome." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." One important concept that I teach and have embraced is "evaluated experience is the best teacher." Taking the time to reflect and learn from our life experiences is a great pathway to developing our character and being more successful.

We also can learn from the experiences of others. One way to do that is to engage in professional associations and hear about experiences from our peers. I really appreciate teaching adult learners and the engagement and mutual learning that takes place in the classroom. Other means to learn from others include: reading books and articles by experienced practitioners and experts; participating in conferences, seminars, and webinars; listening to podcasts; and finding email

resources (e.g. Minute with Maxwell, Jon Gordon's weekly newsletter).

Closing thought: Horace Greeley once wrote, "Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, and riches take wings. Only one thing endures, and that is character." Let's be men and women of character, set a good example, and make the world a better place! ■

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