

Character / Ethics in Leadership

By Chris Boleman

Abraham Lincoln once said, “*Character* is like a tree and *reputation* like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it and the tree is the real thing.” How true is that statement? Stop and think about that quote for a minute. Then ask yourself, how do people view your shadow? If it is not in as positive light as you would like, then it is probably time to look at the tree. The tree doesn’t lie. It is the real thing.

Today, we hear and see the word *character* everywhere. What exactly does it mean and how does it relate to leadership?

Character is the inherent complex of attributes that determine a person’s moral and ethical actions and reactions. There are all types of words that provide examples of good character. These include, but are not limited to such terms as: honesty, inspiring, courageous, unselfish, competent, tact, loyal, integrity, loyal, trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. We will examine the last six in much more detail later in this manuscript.

Bennis (1989) said that after vision and passion, integrity (character) is the most basic fundamental competency to be leader. Character, proper ethics, and integrity are based on the foundation of *trust*. Do the people you lead trust you in your leadership role? This is certainly something everyone must ask themselves as leaders. If the answer is no or not completely, then what can we do as leaders to develop that trust?

Probably one the most widely referenced material related to character is from the Josephson Institute (1996). The approach this group uses is based on six pillars of character. These are: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

A further definition of each is below.

- *Trustworthiness*: be honest, be reliable, have the courage to do the right thing, build a good reputation, and be loyal.
- *Respect*: treat others with respect, follow the Golden Rule, be tolerant of differences, Use good manners, be considerate of the feelings of others, Do not threaten, and deal peacefully with anger, insults and disagreements.
- *Responsibility*: do what you are supposed to do, always do your best, use self-control, be self-disciplined, think before you act, and be accountable for your choices.
- *Fairness*: play by the rules, take turns and share, be open-minded; listen to others, do not take advantage of others, and do not blame others carelessly.
- *Caring*: be kind, be compassionate and show you care, express gratitude, forgive others and help people in need

- *Citizenship*: do your share to make your community better, cooperate, get involved in community affairs, stay informed, be a good neighbor, obey laws and respect authority.

Some adults may look at these and say that these characteristics of the six pillars seem elementary and to some extent, they are probably right. Character and integrity is the basis of our values. Values are learned and practiced from a young age. So, as you read through these, they may seem like they are written for youth. Should that really matter? There are still some very important points that each of us as leaders should evaluate and think through in terms to how we look at ourselves.

After you read these six pillars of character and the examples that help define them, can you say you say that you adhere to all of them? You probably can not. The majority of us probably could not, but the key is to work on them and at least think about them when you are making decisions as a leader. There is an old saying that says, "You can not teach an old dog new tricks." However, it has nothing to do with humans!! We can learn new tricks and we can build our character traits as human beings and leaders.

Another item you can use to see if you are making ethical decisions or decisions with good character is the "Four Way Test" described by Lussier and Achua (2001). It says to ask yourself four simple questions. They are:

- Is it the truth?
- Is it fair to all concerned?
- Will it build good will?
- Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

If you can answer *YES* to each of these questions, then your decision as a leader is most likely both ethical.

We are living in an age of accountability. We are also living in a time where we turn the television on and see some so called role model making poor or bad choices. This is the time for each of us to standup and set a good example as leaders in our community. If we set the appropriate example, then others will build that needed trust in us and we can continue to lead effectively. Take your leadership role seriously and always remember that your character goes along way to describing who you are. You never know when or where someone may be watching!!!

References

Bennis, W. (1989). *On becoming a leader*. Wilmington, MA: Trump Mediaeval by C&C Associates.

Josephson Institute of Ethics (1996). Michael S. Josephson.

Lussier, R. N. and Achua, C. F. (2001). *Leadership: Theory, Application, Skill Development*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing.