

Character Formation

Foundation of effective leadership.



by Gayle D. Beebe

I'VE SEEN MANY LEADERS ruin their opportunities because of a moral failing. Sometimes indiscretions, embezzling money or corrupt political practices undermine confidence in a leader. But often, lesser evils cause the problem. The capacity to develop character will determine how well leaders achieve long-term, sustainable success.

Peter Drucker worked from a moral vision using the *mirror test*: Whom do you want to see in the mirror when you wake up in the morning—a morally upright and respected person or an individual devoid of a soul?

Drucker said there is no such thing as *business ethics*—we are either ethical or unethical regardless of the situation. He insisted that bedrock integrity is necessary for effective leadership.

Drucker believed the greatest test of our integrity and character is the way we treat other people. In *Management*, he writes, "They may forgive a man a great deal: incompetence, ignorance, insecurity or bad manners. But they will not forgive his lack of integrity." He thought a lack of integrity should disqualify anyone from leadership.

The formation of our character creates predictability, dependability and consistency. These qualities ensure that our leadership is reliable and motivates people to place confidence in us. Our effectiveness as leaders is built on trust. Although 75 percent of Americans admit they would lie, cheat or steal if they thought they could get away with it, leaders are on constant display and can't escape the spotlight and scrutiny.

Character is the foundation of great leadership success; when absent, it charts the path for colossal failure. Our beliefs, actions, self-reflections and corrective behaviors form our character. Leaders must develop moral self-reflection and self-correction. Our moral awakening often results from realizing we're out of sync with our deepest convictions and then getting back on course by elevating those convictions and pursuing our principles from a new perspective. We experience a moral reorientation by seeing present reality in a new light.

Once we see how out of sync we are and how much we need to improve our performance, we can engage in the sort of development that inspires people to follow us and rely on us. Our strategies for success and recovery from failures inspire people to trust us and give us the moral authority to lead well.

I've identified 10 qualities that reflect the health and vitality of our character and odds of achieving long-term success.

1. Effective leaders lead from a foundation of integrity.

Webster defines integrity as "Fidelity to moral principles, honesty, soundness, completeness." This means being true to our word and avoiding false appearances. As leaders, our lives are always on display. Hence, everything we do has to be above board and beyond reproach.

2. Effective leaders display wisdom and judgment.

This inspires the trust and confidence of our board, associates and clients. As leaders, we spend more time achieving results through other people. Technical competence gets us the job, but relational competence helps us advance. We're hired for our abilities, but we advance because of our attitudes, behaviors and conduct.

3. Effective leaders absorb and undo the evil of others.

This requires maturity. Making a gracious response to an ungracious person is a hallmark of character. Over time, an organization can develop dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics. Leaders bear the brunt of attacks targeted at the organization. Responding well requires skill and insight. Reflection and discipline equip leaders to discern the real problem and the best response.

4. Effective leaders work with understanding and respect for each member.

The ability to identify, develop and celebrate the gifts of those who work for us shows integrity. To achieve quality, we must gain our employees' goodwill by enabling them to fully develop their capacities. Confidence in our gifts and abilities help us develop those we lead.

5. Effective leaders also work for the greater good, developing others.

Some leaders use their positions to promote

themselves, but those who work for the greater good look out for the interests of the organization. Our most satisfying work will serve purposes greater than ourselves. This is work for the greater good. Yet most cultural messages today are self-centered and self-focused. Through character formation, we can sublimate our own interests for the greater good and seek results that benefit the company.

6. Effective leaders are temperate in all matters.

Leaders who show moderation in all things, including responses to renegade employees, don't overreact or create unnecessary crises. Restraints must be established—including policies, guidelines and plans that define reality and channel priorities and decisions.

Temperance also includes a spirit of toleration that keeps leaders from retaliating and gaining a reputation for acting with contempt and disregard for people.

7. Effective leaders balance a confidence in their ability with humility in their approach.

In *Good to Great*, Collins notes that the most effective leaders have low ego needs and find their greatest satisfaction in lead-

ing organizations to success. Being confident in our ability but humble in our approach requires us to celebrate the gifts of those around us and recognize that our fortunes could change anytime.

8. Effective leaders are calm, loyal, prudent and discerning.

Excitable leaders often lack restraint. Associates lose confidence in leaders who can't control their emotions, knowing they could become targets of unprovoked attacks.

9. Effective leaders hire well, communicate clearly and trust the people they hire to achieve results.

We trust leaders who trust us, communicate a compelling mission and vision, define measures of performance and tactics and strategies needed to achieve desired results.

10. Effective leaders balance concern for the overall welfare of their employees with the need to achieve positive results.

Companies that go from good to great achieve sustainable success by balancing the need to achieve long-term results with care of their people.

As our leadership responsibilities increase, our character is tested in new and more intense ways. By engaging in the disciplines of the moral life, we can cultivate integrity that never wanes. LE

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ACTION: Cultivate these 10 qualities of character.



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