

## The Question of Character

Visions are the beginning of the business planning process and they come from the character of those who have them. People and organizations with character and integrity are completely authentic for at their center is a solid core of transparency, not the vagueness or conflict you often find. These companies are rational and experience the world with less danger and thus more freedom. This experience inspires the courage for its members to experiment with newer and different behaviors. The fear that can discourage this experimentation in organizations without this clarity is just not there.

Over the years, most of us have been able to observe a number of leaders or managers afflicted by what could be described as flawed characters. They drive others through human influence behavior and strategies that are marked by deception, insincerity, dishonesty, and insecurity. Many have achieved some short-term success and herein lies the problem. They have been positively reinforced for this behavior during their development in the past and are encouraged to repeat it. If the emphasis of the organization is short term, these types of managers can appear to be successful. With a longer-term perspective though, they cannot be successful and even the good ones will be perceived as scheming.

As an observation, I have noticed over the years that being rich can insulate people from crucial human challenges. This richness doesn't have to be just in monetary concerns though it certainly seems to apply there. It also means being gifted in abilities, appearance, aptitudes, and intelligence, etc. It just seems to me that self-made people seem to be the happiest. They seem to be the most grateful, the most content, and they seemed to have developed a richness of character that others are missing. In short, the struggle between difficulty and accomplishment appears to build character. I see two implications this has for developing organizations.

1. When interviewing leader and manager candidates, ask them to relate some of their own incidents in overcoming difficulties and what they learned from that experience.
2. Build venues for this achievement through challenging work assignments into the organization's way of being to assist in the development of the character of its leaders.

It is the strongest trial of character to have the insight to give up a lot of good today's to get a better "eventually." It is the motivation to be accountable for the well being of the larger organization by operating in service rather than in control of others in the company. With character, managers can choose service over self-interest and hold themselves accountable to all those over whom they exercise power. The days of someone being able to make a living by simply planning, watching, controlling, or evaluating the actions of others are behind us.

Doubts about leaders are often about their credibility, not their talents. Until they establish a bond of trust, followers will question if their leaders possess the character to demonstrate that they are serving the institution and not themselves.

There is a distinction here between a lack of character and a lack of self-knowledge. My observations are that those who are experiencing just a lack of self-knowledge are redeemable while those lacking in character are not. Though acquiring self-knowledge may be a painful process, with self-knowledge and self-understanding leaders can reduce the risk they may use the organization to address their own obsessions. Without this, they will really stand out as not fitting in as more and more people have positive experiences in achieving things together and getting recognition for that achievement.

So what does this all mean? I think it means that organizations that are serious about this question of character have to insure there is an effective and ongoing process of obtaining feedback from those being led. It can be in the form of validated surveys with facilitated feedback sessions or through the use of a 360-degree feedback process. Somehow the feedback from those being led has to become an important part of every leader and manager's review process including a close tie in with compensation and bonuses.

Copyright © Paul W. Larson, THE MYRDDIN GROUP, LLC, 2004, all rights reserved