

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTER IN LEADERSHIP**

For leadership to move from being simply effective (which includes the presence of capacity and commitment) to being truly worthy, leaders also need the integrity, courage, and humility to earn and maintain stakeholder trust and to be accountable. This is also known as the character to lead.

In business today, and the broader system, the presence or absence of certain behaviours contributing to success are often markedly different than the behaviours contributing to failure. The executives who fail did not display many of the positive behaviours that are ultimately included in the character construct, and are perceived as “low in character.” People are much more likely to want to follow those executives who are deemed “high in character.” Research suggests that people are more satisfied with leaders who demonstrate high character. Research also suggests that people are likely to put more discretionary effort into their jobs when they are working for high-character leaders.

Character encompasses three factors: *Personal Integrity and Ethics, Organizational Integrity and Courage, and Humility, Gratitude, and Forgiveness.*

### **Personal Integrity and Ethics**

The first factor is fundamental to leadership. Integrity has been found to be related to perceptions of CEO success, perceptions of organizational bottom-line effectiveness, and employees' job satisfaction. When asked what characteristics people looked for in leaders whose direction they would willingly follow and admire, 88% indicated honesty (i.e., a person worthy of trust and demonstrating consistency between word and deed).

Personal integrity emphasizes consistency—between values and words, and words and behaviours. A colloquialism might be that leaders with high personal integrity, “let their yes be yes, their no be no, and if they change their minds, they let others know.” From the follower's perspective, personal integrity can be damaged by small missteps (e.g., promises and commitments not kept, scheduling a meeting and not attending, saying one thing and doing another), or big events (e.g., fiduciary breach, sexual harassment). Breaches of either type can seriously erode trust and credibility, and accumulate to actual dishonesty and personal failure.

At the most basic level, leaders must understand the difference between right and wrong, be willing to address ethical dilemmas, and hold themselves and others accountable to high standards of professional and organizational ethics.

Leaders also need to be willing to serve as visible role-models of ethical leadership. Leaders with integrity openly share information (as appropriate), make their thinking available to others, and encourage broad participation in decisions and actions. When people do not know the minds of their leaders, they are less likely to trust them.

### **Organisational Integrity and Courage**

Organisational integrity and courage emphasises the need for leaders to enforce their organizations' stated values and ethics. This also means courageously ensuring that power is appropriately managed and balanced.

Organisational integrity requires leaders to develop a system of checks and balances to enforce the ethical standards and policies of the organization. The costs of not doing so can be substantial.

It takes courage to step up and hold the organization accountable for doing what it says it is going to do—or what it *should* do. Saying what needs to be said, making unpopular decisions, and then modeling, recognizing, and rewarding appropriate courage in others brings organizational integrity to life. Doing so requires dealing with one's own fear. Skillful courage is careful and mindful. The goal for *courage* is to have the greatest impact while thoughtfully and mindfully dealing with important issues. It is not just “whistle-blowing,” but fully participating in the organization to make it more consistent and effective.

Executives, by the very nature of their roles, have enormous power to set direction, make decisions, allocate resources, and influence careers. We contend that *worthy leadership* requires an equitable, fair, and responsible approach to (and use of) power.

## **Humility, Gratitude, and Forgiveness**

These three components are seen as interrelated filters through which leaders tend to see themselves, work, and the people around them. These filters tend to be powerful influences on leaders' day-to-day interactions. They inform their decisions, and may heavily impact their ability to attract loyal and willing followers.

The first dimension is *humility*. It refers to having a reasonable view of oneself—and an accurate understanding and acceptance of one's strengths and development opportunities. *Humility* means representing contributions accurately, accepting praise graciously, and showing sincere appreciation to others. Leaders who show *humility* are appropriately proud of their accomplishments and have self-confidence; but they are not arrogant. They fundamentally do not see themselves as better than others.

The second dimension of *HGF* is *gratitude*. It refers to having a primary life orientation that says, “I'm going to celebrate what's good and be grateful for what I have, who I am, and where I am in life.” We are not suggesting a leader should not be ambitious or aspire to want to do more, contribute more, or change the world. However, we are suggesting that a “cup half full” philosophy is oftentimes more adaptive than the inverse. This goes a step beyond optimism. *Gratitude* also emphasizes showing others sincere personal appreciation for their contributions.

The final dimension of *HGF* is *forgiveness*. Some leaders get offended quickly, and forgive others slowly, which ultimately fosters an environment of vindictiveness and fear. The ability to forgive is linked to multiple positive outcomes. People taught the skills of forgiveness see benefits including increased well-being over time and a decrease in perceived stress and physical health symptoms.

Taken together, *The Character to Lead* may depart from how we traditionally assess leadership potential, performance, and success. Unfortunately, research on these factors in the realm of leadership is generally lacking. However, we increasingly believe that *Character* is a protective factor that helps individuals and organizations avoid catastrophic failures, as well as bolster strong followership. *Character* points the way to understanding what a leader *will do* across a variety of leadership contexts.

*Read the full article here: Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research Copyright 2008 by the American Psychological Association 2008, Vol. 60, No. 4, 366–382 1065-9293/08/\$12.00 DOI: 10.1037/1065-9293.60.4.366 (The search for worthy leadership) by A. Dale Thompson, Myranda Grahek, Ryan E. Phillips, and Cara L. Fay.*