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What is character and why it really does matter

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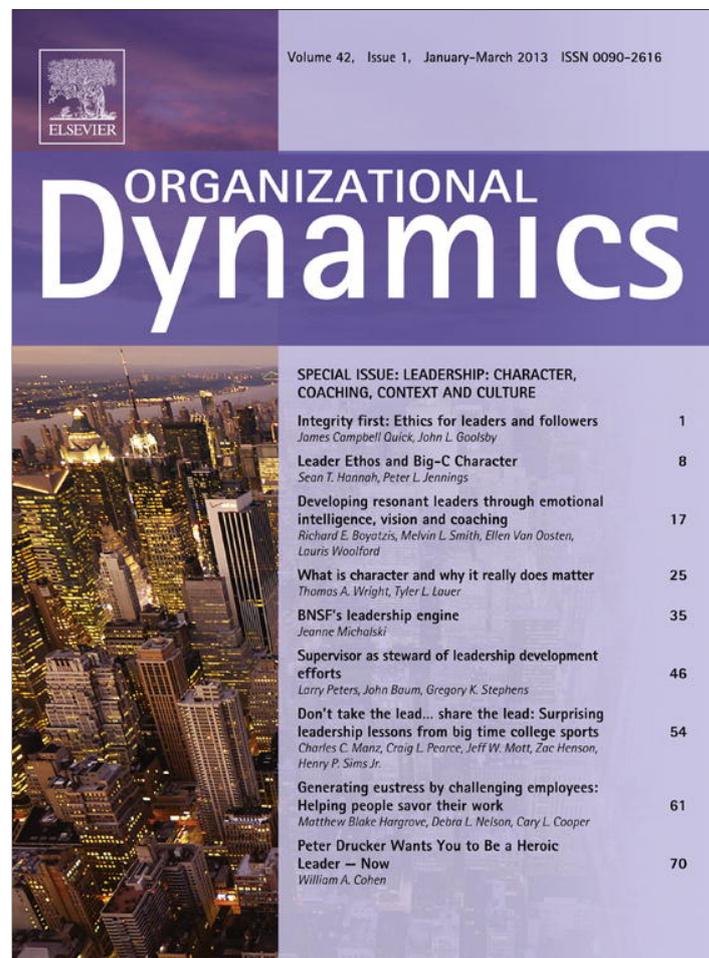


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**ORGANIZATIONAL
Dynamics**

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COACHING, CONTEXT AND CULTURE**

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What is character and why it really does matter

Thomas A. Wright, Tyler L. Lauer

The true test of a man's character is what he does when no one is looking.

Legendary UCLA Basketball Coach John Wooden

“CHARACTER” AND POLITICS

Massachusetts candidate, and eventual winner, for the United States Senate, Elizabeth Warren, apparently thought “no one was looking” a number of years ago when she falsely claimed Native American identity and was hired as the “first woman of color” at Harvard Law School. Since the story broke in the spring of 2012, Warren’s responses have ranged from ridiculous to the sublime (her affinity for Cherokee cooking). Perhaps most distressing was her repeated claim that she never promoted her supposed minority status to get a job and after being hired that she never knew that Harvard touted her as a minority. After repeated scrutiny, Warren finally admitted that, in fact, she had told Harvard and Penn about her supposedly Native American ancestry, a claim based solely on “family lore.” Even with this serious question to her character, Warren easily won the election, in large part by raising more campaign contributions than her less than highly regarded opponent, incumbent Scott Brown. Unfortunately for the voting public, instead of directly addressing this issue of character, both candidates knowingly took the low road and actively engaged in much negative campaigning, leaving many voters disgusted with the process.

In the context of our quote from longtime (1948–1975) UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, Warren was obviously not looking very closely when her character was tested. A job at the prestigious Harvard Law School was more important than telling the truth about her ancestry. For many today the widely recognized crisis in leadership, integrity, courage, sense of duty, even one’s zest for life and work, can be associated with the perceived decline in individual character and organizational virtue. At the extreme, a number of social commentators have eulogized that character, if not “dead”

is “dying” and at a rapid pace. Coupled with the decline in character has been the rise in various forms of moral individualism. This is unfortunate because character plays a significant role in better understanding a wide array of human activities and endeavors. In addition, as further evidenced by our quote, recognition of character’s important role is long-standing and did not commence with the more recent moral (and financial) collapse of Arthur Andersen, Fannie Mae, Siemens, Solyndra, AIG, and WorldCom, among many others.

Perhaps no leading public leadership figure in modern times has better recognized the important role of character in everyday life than the 26th President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was resolute in his conviction that “The foundation stone of national life is, and ever must be, the high individual character of the average citizen.” In one of his first official acts as President, Roosevelt introduced a comprehensive anti-corruption campaign against a number of the nation’s most influential industries and corporate monopolies with the overarching goal of helping to renew American character. Generating great interest with the public, Roosevelt’s anti-corruption campaign was highly successful in its intended effect of uncovering corrupt gatekeepers from both the private and public sectors. Roosevelt’s crusade also had unintended consequences.

In his haste to expose dishonesty and strengthen citizen character, one side effect was that a number of honest individuals had their character falsely defamed. To his credit, while emphasizing his strong desire to combat dishonesty and corruption, Roosevelt also was clear in his disdain toward those who fabricated stories or lied to solely foster their self-interest. In a word he adopted from John Bunyan’s, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Roosevelt called these scoundrels, muckrakers, and noted that “an epidemic on indiscriminant assault upon character does not good, but very great harm...” For Roosevelt, a muckraker was obviously an individual very much devoid of character. Dennis L. Smith has firsthand knowledge of the great harm caused by false, indiscriminant muckraking assaults on his character.

A CASE OF CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

In a story that ended up in the national press, Dennis L. Smith, a former Iowa State University employee in the College of Engineering's marketing department had his character viciously assaulted when he exposed his supervisor's mismanagement, abuse of authority and financial misconduct to the then Iowa State University President. In retaliation for exposing his supervisor's criminal mismanagement (she eventually plead guilty to first-degree theft), Smith was accused of being "a very real threat to personal safety" and a "potential terrorist or mass murderer" and fired. Incredibly, Smith had no idea that he was being accused of these heinous acts until after the fact. Taking his case to the Iowa courts after several years of abuse, Smith was awarded \$500,000 by the jury for emotional distress, with the judge awarding him an additional \$784,000, plus attorney fees, for loss of income and damage to his reputation.

Highly typical for whistleblowers, Smith's perseverance, valor, and integrity in the face of adversity came with severe costs. Friends and co-workers testified that as a result of the years of experienced harassment, Smith lost weight, increased his alcohol consumption and became irritable at work. And if this wasn't enough, getting another job was made exceedingly difficult because he was not able to find alternative employment without references from the very supervisors who colluded to retaliate against him. Even after the jury vindication verdict in April 2012, the retaliation continued as Iowa State University announced its intention to appeal the court decision! Smith demonstrated strength of character in the face of the adversity he faced.

Similar to Warren's contentious congressional race in Massachusetts, the 2012 United States presidential race has emphasized not only the importance of, but also the confusion regarding the meaning of character. With the use of negative campaigning techniques reaching epidemic proportions by candidates from both political parties, Vice President Joe Biden told a partisan crowd on the Friday before election Tuesday that "Character's the most important ingredient a president must have to lead a great nation." He then went on to note that "It's clear who has character (meaning in the presidential race), and it's clear who doesn't have character." However, for many it is not clear what character *is* and *is not*. In fact, character has come to be increasingly confused with an individual's "values" and various aspects of "personality." As we will see, this has not been how character has traditionally been considered.

CHARACTER DEFINED

The development of rigorous definitions of character has long challenged scholars in the applied sciences. Over 90 years ago, the prominent American psychologist William James found the task of defining character to be so daunting that he begrudgingly concluded that character could at best be considered as those particular mental and moral attitudes that leave one feeling most deeply and intensely vibrant and alive. For James, this transcendent moment is best epitomized by one's inner voice telling them that "This is the real me!" The James reference to the "real me" emphasizes the importance of being as precise as possible in delineating the

character construct. Many of these same definitional issues still exist today – with the confusion surrounding what constitutes *character*, as opposed to merely *values* or *personality*, becomingly quite problematic. Fortunately, a grounded definitional basis for a more precise conceptualization of character can be found in a number of sources.

Included among these sources are Aristotelian thought, the Judeo-Christian beliefs advocated by St. Paul of *faith*, *hope* and *charity*, such Eastern philosophies as Confucianism (as espoused in the tenets of *jen*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, & *xin*), as well as by the more modern, secular models such as utilitarian, justice and social contract. While traditional views of character (as well as virtue) have been influenced by a range of religious and philosophical sources, it has long been recognized that they share one important similarity. They typically contain both moral *and* social dimensions. Aristotle was clear in noting that character has a social component in addition to the more obvious moral component. According to Aristotle, strength of character is an acquired trait, learned through the tedious process of trial and error. Related to this is his doctrine of the "golden mean." In life, we are often confronted with situations involving a choice between two or more actions. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, well expresses this choice dilemma in noting, "To enjoy the things we ought and to hate the things we ought has the greatest bearing on excellence of character." Subject to the limitations and restrictions of one's available talents and resources, those exhibiting a virtuous character select a course of action from between the two extremes of disposition (*hexis*), those of deficiency or excess. For example, Aristotle regarded generosity as the mean between wastefulness and stinginess; valor constituted the mean between cowardliness and rashness.

The importance of character was also evident in a number of the leading Eastern religions and philosophies. The teachings of Confucius are often considered the most influential in the history of Chinese thought and civilization. His moral and political philosophy, with its emphasis on education and leadership, eventually became the official religion in China. His teachings were recorded mainly in the form of aphorisms, collated in the *Analects*. Although his views on character were not formally presented in a classification format, they are readily observable throughout the *Analects*. The central importance of character to Confucian thought is readily apparent when he noted, "When we see men of worth, we should think of equaling them; when we see men of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves." According to Confucian thought, individuals are urged to exercise continuous vigilance over their character. It is this vigilance that enables us to determine a proper course of conduct.

It is interesting to note that many of the views of such leading American founders as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine on strengths of character were influenced not only by St. Paul's Judeo-Christian beliefs of faith, hope and charity, but also by the then emerging secular approaches proposed by utilitarian, justice, and social contract models. For example, the English social philosophers, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, were especially influential in developing a social contract perspective. Building upon Locke's famous proposition that "the discipline of desire is the background of character," Benjamin Franklin developed a well-known classification of strengths of character extolling the merits of leading ordered, humble,

industrious, sincere, clean, and just lives. For Jefferson, character "...is the manners and spirit of a people which preserves a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution." As we discuss below, the best way to not only understand, but also "treat" this canker is to consider character as a multidimensional construct. The following three character dimensions are the most widely accepted throughout the ages: moral discipline, moral attachment, and moral autonomy.

An individual exhibits *moral discipline* if she suppresses individual, personal needs for those of a greater societal good. The second dimension of character is *moral attachment*. Moral attachment constitutes a clear affirmation of an individual's commitment to someone or something greater than herself. The third dimension is *moral autonomy*. One exhibits moral autonomy if he has the capacity to freely make ethical, character-based decisions. Autonomy means that a person has both the necessary discretion *and* the skills of judgment at their disposal to freely act morally. Building on these three dimensions, character can be defined as those interpenetrable and habitual qualities within individuals, and applicable to organizations that both constrain and lead them to desire and pursue personal and societal good.

The most comprehensive classification framework in the social sciences for measuring character was developed by psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman and is called the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)*. Peterson and Seligman identified six core virtues (with the strengths of character common to each virtue listed in parentheses): wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, critical-thinking, love of learning, perspective); courage (valor, integrity, industry, zest); humanity (kindness, love, social intelligence); justice (fairness, leadership, citizenship); temperance (forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation); and transcendence (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality).

According to Peterson and Seligman, strengths of character are the processes or mechanisms that define the six broader virtues. For example, the virtue of courage can be achieved through such strengths of character as valor, integrity, industry, and zest – approaching life with excitement and energy. These strengths are all similar in that they encompass emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, whether that opposition is internal or external to the individual(s) involved. For example, Dennis L. Smith exhibited valor in the face of extreme external opposition from multiple coworkers and superiors for just doing the right thing. As often happens, experiencing external opposition created internal dissonance for Smith, resulting in a number of dysfunctional behaviors. Furthermore, the fact that individuals can be high in certain strengths and low in others indicates that the various strengths of character are best considered to be distinct. In the work arena, perhaps no titan of commerce did more to highlight the distinctive, and sometimes contradictory, nature of character strength than did Henry Ford.

HENRY FORD: A CASE OF CHARACTER ENIGMA

Henry Ford repeatedly spoke about the benefits of having individuals with strengths of character in one's employ.

Undertaken through the auspices of his infamous "Sociological Department," Ford tirelessly strove in assisting his workers in the development of such strengths of character as thrift, savings, sobriety and cleanliness, among other social habits. Alternatively, Ford ran into severe criticism for making compliance to these strengths of character required prerequisites of initial hiring and continued employment. His strong conviction in having compliant employees is best expressed in his own words, "...if the [the employee] is not living a sober life, or is neglecting his duties as a father or husband, and he persists in such a course, he cannot be an associate in our business..." For all his contributions, Henry Ford was truly an enigma regarding the topic of character. A self-pronounced pacifist during World War I, he was also accused of being a war profiteer. Furthermore, while he typically supported the cause of minorities, especially blacks and the physically handicapped, Ford was virulently anti-Semitic in both his attitude and behavior.

This prejudice toward members of the Jewish faith was manifested in the series of ninety-one articles starting on May 20, 1920, in the *Dearborn Independent*. Ford called this series "The International Jew: The World's Problem." Pivotal to the series were the so-called "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and Ford's belief in the desire of "the Jews" to dominate the world. The series gained popularity and was instrumental in significant increases in the *Dearborn Independent's* circulation, which rose to an impressive 700,000. Ford eventually issued an apology for the series, but only after the Hollywood producer and owner of Fox Movietone News, William Fox, made it known that he intended to include photographs of Ford automobiles destroyed in accidents in every weekly Movietone newsreel. In addition, Fox made it known that each newsreel would also include pictures of mangled and dead crash victims. Sensing a huge media embarrassment, Ford offered his "apology" along with his announcement that he was going to budget \$150,000 (a huge advertising sum in the 1920s) to advertise Ford cars in Yiddish newspapers. Ford's "contradictions" certainly epitomize the challenges associated with any discussion and help highlight our contention discussed next that character should not be confused with values and personality.

CHARACTER IS NOT VALUES

As epitomized in the 2012 political elections, the supposed significance attached to a candidate's "values" has increasingly gained ground in both the social media and organizational sciences. Interestingly, whereas the concept of values has achieved widespread status as a catch-all category for a wide range of attitudes, judgments, decisions, beliefs, preferences, and orientations, the word itself is a rather late-comer to our vocabulary. Given its extensive current use, it may surprise many to know that the word "values" did not appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until shortly before World War II. The rising popularity of values, at the expense of character, can best be understood in the context of the significant shift in western society from a "producer-based" to a "consumption-based" orientation.

Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Ford well epitomize both the "rise and fall" of character as traditionally associated with such words as "honor" and "duty." For Roosevelt,

character was best considered in the context of explicit moral standards or codes of conduct oriented toward work, building, and sacrifice for the benefit of the common good. These constituted the “producer values” so central to Max Weber’s *Protestant Work Ethic*. As personified by Henry Ford, our character enigma, there was a concurrent shift in western society from this “production-based” orientation to an increased emphasis on such “mass consumption-based” values as material good accumulation, leisure, physical pleasure, and the cultivation of personal preferences. One consequence of this consumption-based focus is the belief by many today that our leaders demonstrate “good” character if they do not lie, cheat or steal too much. That is, as long as a leader is seen as being transactional or instrumental in our accumulation of material goods, while not hindering our personal choice preferences, we are willing to accept a modicum of lying, cheating, and stealing behavior from them. The eminent psychologist and educator, Robert Sternberg, refers to this acceptance as a prime indicator that we are “slip-sliding away, down the ethical slope.” Of course, to accept this behavior in others, we must be willing to accept it in ourselves.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO “HONEST ABE AND ABIGAIL”?

There is nobody looking and you see a thick stack of \$100 bills innocently lying on the ground. What do you do? Research indicates that more and more people are willing to take the money and run (or walk as the case may be). Dan Ariely, a behavioral economics professor at Duke University, provides many ingenious experiments to support his premise that most people cheat as long as they can provide a rationalization and do not expect to get caught. In one study, individuals took 20 answer problems. When their tests were turned in and handed back, the average score was four correct responses. However, when individuals took the test and were able to destroy their answer sheet and self-report their score, the average increased to six correct responses! Since many individuals today would probably say this is not really cheating, given the small stakes involved, let us consider the big stakes plight of Melvin Kiser. Mr. Kaiser happened to be in the vicinity when bags containing roughly \$2,000,000 in cash unexpectedly tumbled from an armored car. Dozens of motorists came screeching to a stop and a mad scramble ensued to pick up the “free” money. Like other motorists, Mr. Kiser stopped and picked up \$57,000. Unlike many others, he voluntarily returned the money. Unfortunately, approval of his good deed was far from universal. While his mother told him that she was proud of him, his father told him that he should have taken the money as he had raised Melvin better than that! Adding further insult to injury, one of his coworkers asked how he could return the money as it “was a gift from God and you gave it back.” By the way, only about \$100,000 out of the \$2,000,000 was returned. “Honest Mel’s” actions aside, the behavior exhibited by almost everyone else sadly differs from what constituted “good” character in the time of Lincoln and Roosevelt. The distinction between values and character bears further discussion.

Highly relevant when we consider traditional approaches to character, values are not typically tied to a particular

moral code or standard. At the extreme, they are considered to be situationally or contextually determined, once again reinforcing the notion that, as most commonly considered today, values are devoid of any strict adherence to particular moral codes or standards. Irrespective of these apparent conceptual shortcomings, the term values has attained a significant measure of acceptance in both academics and society at large and is often linked with such qualifiers as lifestyle, scholarly, family, traditional, and religious.

This apparent lack of moral standards in the values-laden lexicon has had a number of consequences. When Melvin Kiser’s story made the news, call-in listeners to a local radio were clear: the majority would have taken the money. An increasing number of academics and social commentators alike have termed these types of shallow, morally deficient responses as indicative of the “age of whatever” in which individuals will not make a moral judgment, impose a moral standard, or call any type of behavior morally unacceptable. Taken to the extreme, this reluctance to make a decision has been termed the paralysis of “absolutophobia” where “right” and “wrong” has come to be indistinguishable from each other. As an added problem with the over-reliance on these value-laden and feel-good concepts is the apparent ease with which they can be misused in the marketplace and our personal lives. As one example of potential misuse, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported in highly flattering terminology a memorial glorifying the life of a street “sex worker” (i.e., prostitute). To be clear, the issue at hand is not whether to pay tribute to a fellow human being who met an early, violent, and tragic demise resulting from a chosen lifestyle. The problem is the apparent need to sanctify the lifestyle of a street prostitute, a lifestyle that does not merit such glorification. This absolutophobia paralysis has even made its way into the United States Army.

THE PARALYSIS OF ABSOLUTOPHOBIA: THE FORT HOOD MASSACRE

On November 5, 2009, U.S. Army Major Nidal Hasan murdered 12 fellow soldiers and one civilian employee, while wounding 29 others. According to eyewitnesses, Hasan shouted the phrase “Allahu Akbar” (“God is Great”) before opening fire on his comrades. In addition, even though credible evidence exists that Army personnel were aware of Major Hasan’s radical Islamic tendencies dating back to at least 2005, the Army took no action against him, in the belief that having a Muslim psychiatrist contributed to diversity. The Army top brass and President Obama have refused to consider this an act of terror, instead labeling it an incident of workplace violence.

On November 5, 2012, the third anniversary of the murders, a wrongful death claim was filed against the United States Government by 148 victims and families of the victims. Among the complaints, the lawsuit alleges gross negligence and intentional misrepresentation. The lawsuit seeks unspecified compensatory and punitive damages. As it turns out, being designated a terrorist act means that victim wounds would qualify as combat-related, resulting in the victims receiving combat-related benefits. This would only seem fair as a number of the victims died as heroes, including physician assistant, Michael Cahill and psychiatric nurse, Captain John

Gaffaney. Receiving surprisingly little attention from the media, both died while valiantly trying to save their comrades and take down Hasan. Captain Gaffaney's story is especially compelling, as he had just arrived at Ford Hood the day before the terrorist attack to prepare for his deployment to Iraq. His close friend and co-worker, Stephanie Powell, described him simply as "an honorable man."

The paralysis of "absolutophobia" has reached epidemic proportions among our young. Over the years, the lead author has led a number of discussions with undergraduate and graduate level business students at a number of different universities on various ethics topics. One class discussion that is particularly interesting pertains to the possible existence of moral absolutes ("Truth" and "Justice"). When posed to the class, the collective response is almost always universal: there are no moral absolutes, except the "absolute" belief that there are no absolutes. This paralysis of "absolutophobia" is so severe that the vast majority of students refuse to entertain the possibility of absolute laws in the physical sciences. Sadly, in discussions with thousands of students at both secular and religious-based schools over the last 25 years, the lead author has found that the vast majority of students must be prodded to even consider the 10 Commandments as a possible example of a morally based absolute!

This absolutophobia belief pattern comes with some very severe consequences. Upwards of 80 percent of business students admit to cheating, with the modal response for how many times did they cheat being 100 or more. Equally troubling are the reasons given for cheating. For many the choice is simply a matter of individual preference. In class discussions led by the lead author, typical student responses note that it is a personal choice to cheat, one that solely depends on the "context" in which the individual finds himself. In fact, the key decision factor for too many students is not the moral dimension and possible blight to their reputation. Rather it involves the likelihood of their getting caught. Of course, these "age of whatever" responses are not unexpected when one considers the widely publicized blog (it drew hundreds of thousands of readers in one week alone) by a New York University Stern School of Business professor.

In his blog, Panagiotis Ipeiritis vowed never to probe cheating again because he paid a significant penalty "for doing the right thing" and actively enforcing sanctions on student cheaters. No wonder there is an increasingly widespread willingness of many job applicants to knowingly misrepresent accomplishments on their resume, with one pre-employment screening study finding that 95 percent of college-age respondents reported their willingness to lie to get a job. After all, even if they get caught, they can just quit and move on to another job, with no one the wiser. Unfortunately, research also confirms that students willing to lie or cheat in school are also more likely to cheat in other aspects of their lives. As a result, we find ourselves at not only an impending financial precipice, but a moral one as well. As with values, character is not personality.

CHARACTER IS NOT PERSONALITY

Psychologists typically refer to personality as individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and

behavior. In the social and organizational sciences, the study of personality has focused on two broad areas. The first focuses on understanding the role of individual differences in various personality characteristics. Consistent with our assertion that character is *not* personality, research has demonstrated that each of the Big-5 personality traits of extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness and emotional stability is distinguishable from a number of character strengths, including valor, critical-thinking, industry, integrity and self-regulation. The second approach examines how the various aspects of a person come together to form the complete or whole individual. Over the past few years, the concept of the "cult of personality" has received increasing levels of attention as one aspect of the whole individual approach.

The cult of personality phenomenon refers to the idealized, even god-like, public image of an individual consciously shaped and molded through constant propaganda and media exposure. As a result, one is able to manipulate others based entirely on the influence of public personality. Max Weber long ago referred to this power of personality as "charismatic authority." It is becoming evident that the charismatic leader, especially in politics, has increasingly become the product of media and self-exposure. At variance with traditional approaches to character that emphasize a moral based framework, the cult of personality perspective focuses on the often shallow, external images that many public figures cultivate to create an idealized and heroic image.

Along with Weber, this market-based approach to the creation of a "character-surrogate" cult of personality can be traced back to the work of the prominent psychologist, Gordon Allport. Allport undertook the quest to expunge the discussion of character from social science investigation. For Allport, the goal was simple, to remove any trace of "moral" from the investigation of personality characteristics or as he famously stated, "to define character as personality evaluated and personality. . . as character devaluated." While there were a few notable exceptions, John Dewey for one, Allport's viewpoint won. Traditional views of character, emphasizing both moral and social components, all but vanished from psychological and organizational research for several decades. The recent fall from grace of U.S. Army General and CIA Director David Petraeus well demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between traditional approaches to character and the cult of personality.

THE CULT OF PERSONALITY AND FALL OF GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS

The unfolding saga of the self-admitted discretions of former four-star general and CIA Director David Petraeus provides another window into the complexities surrounding the distinction among character, values and the cult of personality. Petraeus, considered a modern day Sir Galahad, shared a widely held self and mass media-created cult of personality as a warrior of purity, incapable of personal transgression. Widely known within the military profession and the media for his super-human physical fitness prowess, Petraeus made a habit of giving reporters personal interview access during his rigorous workouts. Using these workouts as an effective

backdrop provided the necessary credibility for his often-repeated story of performing 50 pushups as a young officer to convince his Army doctor to authorize an early release from the hospital after he suffered a bullet wound. These well-orchestrated attempts were successful in creating a cult of personality persona that further embellished his significant achievements. Unfortunately, in a time of personal moral crisis, and in the context of Locke's famous dictum, his inability to discipline his desire severely compromised his character. We next consider character-based leadership and what we call "profiles in character" as an innovative anecdote to values and the cult of personality.

CHARACTER-BASED LEADERSHIP

Incorporating aspects of each of the three elemental character dimensions, a character-based leader is best viewed as an agent for moral change. In that regard, a character-based leader is someone with the necessary self-control (moral discipline) to selflessly act on his or her own volition (moral autonomy) to inspire, sustain, and transform the attitudes and beliefs of both self and followers. Best viewed as providing an overarching moral compass, the character-based leader has the perspective to continuously strive to move his or her group, team or organization beyond narrow, self-interest pursuits toward the attainment of common good goals (moral attachment). While drawing on a number of philosophies, including servant, spiritual, values-based and authentic, character-based leadership is distinguished by its fundamental adherence to a core moral framework. This moral focus is made clear when contrasted with values-based approaches to leadership.

The overarching focus of a values-based approach to leadership is to provide the framework in a pluralistic society to respect each and every individual's attitudes, opinions, beliefs and behaviors (i.e., their "values") no matter how diverse or contradictory. In-and out of classroom discussions with the lead author over the years have proved to be very illuminating. An increasingly prevalent student response to topics ranging from is it right (or wrong) to lie, cheat or steal – to issues surrounding the right to life, pedophilia and the implementation of Sharia law in the United States is "Everything should always be considered in context, it's up to the individuals involved. Who am I to say what is right?" Character-based leadership both complements and meaningfully differs from those approaches emphasizing a values-based approach. In particular, and consistent with a values-based leadership perspective, character-based leadership recognizes the importance of those personal qualities that have been demonstrated to be instrumental to the attainment of individual betterment and fulfillment ("social intelligence"). However, and unlike a values-based perspective, character-based leadership focuses on those moral qualities concerned with the betterment of *both* the individual and society ("exhibiting valor," "forgiveness" and "self-control"). Unfortunately, our research clearly indicates that today's college students score low on the strengths of valor, exhibiting forgiveness and maintaining self-control. We offer our concept of "profiles in character" as a possible anecdote to the moral malaise of values-based leadership and the cult of personality.

PROFILES IN CHARACTER

Over the past several years, the lead author has assigned his undergraduate and graduate level business students the task of completing the 240-item VIA questionnaire. After filling out the survey online, the students receive immediate feedback detailing their scores. Responses are averaged within scales, so that the respondents learn the relative (within subject) ranking of their 24 strengths of character. With their scores in hand, students engage in an often-spirited exchange on the role of character on a wide range of topics, including employee betterment and wellbeing and the development of character-based leadership.

Building upon Peterson and Seligman's 24 strengths of character taxonomy and incorporating a focus group approach, the lead author has developed a number of "top-5" profiles (from the population of all 24 VIA-IS strengths) which respondents (both students and actual business people) consider to be the most beneficial in achieving a leadership role in a growing number of work occupations. Over time, a number of profiles in character-based leadership have been developed for such occupations as manager, college president, entrepreneur, nurse, sales/marketing, accountant, military, and politician, among others. As one example, the "top-5" character-based leadership profile for an accountant includes: prudence, integrity, industry, critical thinking and valor. Preliminary work has developed a top-5 character profile for the U.S. Army. Included in this top-5 character-based leadership profile are valor, critical-thinking, self-regulation, integrity and industry. A number of students express a career interest in the field of sales/marketing. A consistent top-5 signature strength profile of success emerges, with zest consistently rated as the necessary top signature strength, followed by social intelligence, creativity, humor, and curiosity. While offering much to the study of character, as illustrated by the sales/marketing profile, Peterson and Seligman's framework also provides further evidence of the widespread conceptual and operational confusion among character, values, and personality.

While including such traditional or "elevated" strengths of character as valor, integrity, kindness, love, gratitude and hope, their framework also includes such "strengths" as zest, social intelligence, humor, appreciation of beauty, and creativity. As typically considered, humor and zest may be better classified as values, while social intelligence is probably best considered as an aspect of personality. In conversations with the lead author, Christopher Peterson acknowledged the confusion in terminology and explained why a questionnaire on "character" has "values" in the title. The decision was a practical one; the questionnaire's benefactor requested that the word values be included in the title.

One final potential career option that more and more students are seriously considering is that of entrepreneur. Incorporating input from both students and working adults, class discussions regarding what constitutes the strengths of character to be a successful entrepreneur have proven to be very enlightening. Entrepreneurs can be defined as individuals who acquire or exhibit habitual traits, abilities and strengths of character utilized to effectively recognize opportunities, assume risks in a start-up business venture, and overcome obstacles. Entrepreneurs successfully

incorporate new ideas and concepts, or bring existing ideas together in new ways. Signature strength optimal profiles for entrepreneurs include the following strengths: hope, curiosity, zest, industry, and self-regulation.

Some very interesting findings indicate that actual top-5 student profiles are consistently and significantly at variance from the proposed or ideal, occupation-specific profiles. For example, graduate students assess social intelligence as being one of the top strengths necessary to be an effective manager. Similarly, love of learning is considered as one of the top-5 character strengths to be an effective student leader. However, both of these strengths of character are actually among the less commonly self-reported by the students. Similar results have been found among undergraduate business students. In addition, both graduate and undergraduate business students self-rate themselves low in self-regulation and valor.

To address these inconsistencies, and adopting Bandura's social learning or modeling framework, students are encouraged to become more proactive and self-regulatory through the development of an agentic motivational perspective to character-based leadership formation. The basic premise of an agentic approach to learning is that students are encouraged to come to view themselves as self-regulatory and self-reflective organisms, not just as passive beings reacting to influences from their environment. Techniques used include various forms of role-playing, the development of a character-based vocabulary and identification of character role models. Students demonstrate significant interest in these self-reflective results, as indicated by the number of students who voluntarily report that they are motivated to not cheat anymore after completing the class. An added bonus to "good" character is its role in one's wellbeing.

CHARACTER AND WELLBEING

However conceptualized, the relationship between wellbeing and character strength has long been of interest. In fact, it is becoming evident that character, more so than values and personality, is a central and defining feature for a number of aspects of our personal wellbeing. A growing body of evidence indicates linkages between psychological wellbeing and such strengths of character as creative thinking, industry, self-regulation, valor and integrity. The benefits of industry and perseverance on the wellbeing of individuals with cancer, arthritis and HIV/AIDS have also been well documented. In addition, spousal integrity builds relationship trust and is instrumental in marital wellbeing and satisfaction. While these findings clearly demonstrate the role of character in fostering feelings of wellbeing, our case description of Dennis L. Smith raises the interesting question of whether someone can exhibit "too much" character.

A CASE OF "CHARACTER EXCESS"

The plight of Dennis L. Smith is consistent with the conundrum faced by many people of character: they pay a tremendous price for demonstrating the courage to persist in their convictions. Research suggests that individuals in

extreme work situations such as the military and law enforcement are best served with a top-5 signature profile which includes the strengths of character of valor, integrity, industry, critical-thinking and self-regulation. Like Smith, the importance of character and the notion of "character excess" became very clear to the lead author and one of his graduate business classes while he was employed at Kansas State University. Upon receiving one of his class teaching evaluations, he was distressed to notice that a large percentage of the student evaluations had been altered. This type of data tampering is a very serious offense and can be considered as an act of criminal fraud. An initial investigation by Kansas State University's Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning confirmed this fraudulent behavior. As each changed evaluation was from a high (good) to low (bad) evaluation, it was readily apparent that the lead author had no motive. Similarly, interviews with a number of students from the class indicated no student wrongdoing. The question then became one of who was responsible. Given the seriousness of the offense and that a primary suspect was employed in a position of power at the University, the matter was taken directly to the president's office.

Similar to the Smith case and all too many other corporate scandals, the University chose to cover up the incident and attempted to stonewall any further investigation. While troublesome for any victim, these stall tactics were especially problematic for someone with a character strength profile that included valor, industry, fairness, love of learning and integrity. After patiently waiting for one year (while the crime scene went from hot to cold), the lead author critically analyzed (another strength) all of the alternatives and subsequent ramifications and gave the story to the student newspaper. Sensing a "good" story, the newspaper conducted a thorough and independent investigation, confirmed the data tampering, and ran the story. Student reaction was immediate and highly negative toward the administration's cover-up. Assuming the situation had gone away after "successfully" stonewalling the victim's efforts, the article's publication stimulated a swift and severe response from the administration consistent with behavior from a toxic work environment.

The fraud victim was told both orally and in writing in no uncertain terms that if he didn't back off and let go of his desire to see justice done, he would be severely punished. As in the Dennis L. Smith example, his character was falsely attacked and he was tangibly punished even though he was guilty of no wrongdoing other than making people feel "embarrassed" and "upset" about all the negative publicity. Adding further insult, the president-elect of the faculty senate told him that the faculty senate would not get involved with this issue of academic fraud because this involvement might be considered negatively by the administration. This could in turn alienate the administration and hamper the senate's attempt to negotiate increases in faculty salaries. Perhaps even more distressing, the reporter who wrote the story, a graduating journalism major, was "advised" by a high-ranking University official that he might be jeopardizing a future career in journalism because he was listening to the "wrong" people. As evidenced in our final example, all is not lost; Character does really matter and is worth the effort.

THE CASE OF 'DELAYED' INTEGRITY

As an academic, the lead author has had many encounters with student cheating over the years. However, in this case, a student actually turned himself in to the lead author after he had successfully cheated (was not caught) on the class final exam. In subsequent conversations with the student, a valuable lesson on the meaning of character was learned. His lapse in moral discipline left him an "emotional wreck" after the cheating incident. He couldn't eat or sleep as a result of a tightness in the pit of his stomach. He told the lead author that our class discussions on character and ethics reinforced his desire to turn himself in and accept whatever penalty was imposed. Because he viewed the lead author as a positive role model and he wanted to be a positive role model for his daughter (moral attachment), he vowed to never cheat again (moral autonomy). This example is consistent with a growing body of empirical evidence that suggests that people will often forsake self-interest and do what is morally right.

CONCLUSION

In presenting our overview of character, we set out to challenge the increasingly prevalent (and narrow) self-interest perspectives of character considered as merely free-floating values and cults of personality. One can almost hear Theodore Roosevelt's eloquent call for a renewal of more traditional views of character. Our take-away point is simple. As with the impending financial debacle, we find ourselves in a similar moral dilemma. The time is now to carefully consider the many benefits of character and character-based leadership.



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