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The Secret to Success.... and how to hire for it!

So what's the secret to success? If you ask the guy in the doctor's office he'll tell you unequivocally that it is intelligence and education. He wants the smartest, best-trained doctors tending to his medical needs, and nothing less. For the fans watching their favorite sporting event the answer is performing right before their eyes. It is talent and they want as much of it as possible on their team. For yet others, success accompanies the mesmerizing charisma and vision of the great statesman or organizational leader. And for the many of us consigned to the happenstance of birth, success is a constant roulette wheel of serendipity and luck.

But what about in the long run? Does talent alone make a great athlete, or intellect and education the finest doctor or businessperson? And how far can luck or charisma really take you? To a great many people throughout history, long term success requires something else. That something is the Greek word which means to 'mark or engrave'. It is character, the combined traits and values which define individuals, illuminates the paths they take and ultimately enriches or impoverishes their lives. Character is the sum of the choices a person makes, or fails to make, each and every day in public and in the privacy of their own homes. Character buttresses, sustains, and even realizes a person's natural gifts. For many, character not only matters, it is our destiny.

Though the word itself seems less used today, character remains the ground to life's volatile live wire. Our children are taught in school that trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship are the six pillars upon which their lives should be built. Most adults would agree that in the end, character is everything in husbands, fathers, wives, mothers and friends. With few exceptions, politicians will tell you that while vision and charisma help, political leadership is all about character. The best Hollywood movies almost

always tug at character themes of integrity, humility, courage, loyalty, honor, and love. And in business, character is always an assumed quality of leadership. We simply expect good leaders to be strong in character with a consistent upright moral compass and integrity underwriting their actions.

Regrettably, one need only look around to see that character has been under siege of late. Headlines scream of the deplorable manner in which our citizens act and treat each other. Guns and gangs roam the corridors of our schools. In trial after trial, the character of many of the business community's best known executives have been found to be sorely wanting. The politics of politics continues to tarnish many of those who practice it. Professional and amateur sports face countless controversies of cheating and gambling not to mention criminal activity. And on and on and on... Whether you believe that these are irrelevant, transient, clear evidence of moral decay or a harbinger of things to come, they all irrefutably speak to the critical importance of individual, corporate and societal character.

What is character?

Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions, they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

– Frank Outlaw

The dictionary defines character as a set of habits, qualities or attitudes that define a person. It is alternatively defined as moral and ethical strength, or the quality of 'goodness' in a person. A person 'of good character' is said to boast moral or ethical excellence which serves as a true north compass and bulwark in the journey of life.

Character has been the focus of philosophical and religious discussion throughout history. Aristotle devoted considerable attention to the importance of what he called the ‘virtues of excellence’. He listed eight such virtues: courage, temperance, liberality, proper pride, good temper, ready wit, modesty and justice. Aristotle viewed virtues as means between extremes in how humans can act. For example, in the matter of fear, courage is the mean between too much fear (which is to be cowardly) and too little fear (which is to be foolhardy). Similarly, too little selflessness is the singular pursuit of personal interest while too much selflessness impairs the ability to lead and make decisions. To Aristotle, it is at the mean between such extremes in behavior that the individual lives best.

While individuals may be born with certain predispositions, good character is not given to us. It largely develops block by block through instruction, behavior modeling and practice. One becomes virtuous by performing virtuous acts until doing so becomes habit. For children, character development begins as rules of behavior taught by parents, religious institutions and schools. Behaviors are modeled and children practice acting in certain ways until such behavior is internalized and becomes habit. Leadership performs a similar role in organizations by exhibiting and reinforcing the behaviors valued in its membership. Adults bring character traits to the workplace, some more alterable than others, and thus character in the workplace is both a matter of indoctrination and selection.

Why is Character Important?

Somebody once said that in looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence and energy. And if you don't have the first, the other two will kill you. You think about it; it's true. If you hire somebody without integrity, you really want them to be dumb and lazy.
– Warren Buffett

Organizations require individuals to commit themselves to collective goals and objectives which are larger than themselves. Though management theories abound on how to accomplish this, it is always easier said than done. An organization cannot order a nurse or doctor to care about their jobs or to be compassionate with their patients. It cannot ‘six sigma’ people into providing excellent service, or to be nice to others, to be committed or to apply their best effort. A company cannot issue a policy requiring that groups act as teams, trust and respect each other, and collaborate. And it cannot

demand passion any more than it can demand loyalty. Furthermore, happiness, contentment, and self-respect are character traits as much as they are the rewards of one’s efforts, and organizations err if they believe these do not make a difference. While productivity may be the aggregate scorecard of choice for many it is inextricably tied to whether the collection of individuals are enthusiastic, passionate, crushed by setbacks or spurred by them, sociable or solitary, restless or settled, and capable or incapable of intimacy.

It must be acknowledged that character alone can never be the only consideration in choosing doctors, searching for new employees, or deciding on whom to vote. There are morally good people who know little about running a company, a city or a province. They may be as honest as the day is long, but as ignorant as sin about the job itself. Some schoolteachers are model citizens, but lack the knowledge and the ability to teach our children. So while character is of vital importance in every job, in every profession and in all other phases of life, it alone is inadequate in many situations. But that is not the point when it comes to character. Rather, as Peter Drucker so elegantly stated, “while character by itself accomplishes nothing, its absence faults everything”. Thus, while a person or organization lacking character may still be ‘successful’ it will exact a cost with usurious terms of payment. Character is the only foundation upon which high value sustainability is built.

Hiring for Character

“Leadership is a potent combination of character and strategy. But if you must be without one, be without strategy”
– Norman Schwarzkopf

In his book Good to Great, Jim Collins reported that outstanding companies, “place greater weight on character attributes than on specific educational background, practical skills, specialized knowledge, or work experience. Not that specific knowledge or skills are unimportant, but they view these traits as more teachable (or at least learnable), whereas dimensions like character, work ethic, dedication to fulfilling commitments, and values are more ingrained”. To these organizations, before you can be great you have to be good.

So how does an organization hire for ‘good’? It starts by describing those character traits it values for job and organizational success. Academic James Sorros recently published a list of character attributes applicable to business leaders:

- Respectfulness: Respect for others
- Fairness: The equitable and just treatment of people
- Cooperation: The ability to work as part of a team
- Compassion: Showing concern for the welfare of others; being empathetic
- Spiritual Respect: Respect for individual beliefs and customs
- Humility: The capacity to keep yourself from putting the self before others. Understanding your value relative to that of others...not putting oneself down but not holding oneself more highly than we should
- Courage: Strong convictions and the willingness to act upon them
- Passion: Energy and deeply committed enthusiasm to producing the best one can
- Wisdom: the ability to draw on one's knowledge and experience to make well formed judgments
- Competence: a rounded and comprehensive knowledge of the subject matter in which you are dealing and about which you want others to act in a particular way
- Self-Discipline: appropriate self-control over your thoughts and actions and the ability to express emotions in a constructive way.
- Loyalty: a deep commitment to building organizational sustainability; commitment to the idea and ideals of the company
- Selflessness: not putting your interests above others
- Integrity: the perceived degree of congruence between the values expressed by words and those expressed through action; honest representation of a company's values and operating protocols
- Honesty: open, truthful and trustworthy

While a case can be made for the importance of each virtue, they cannot all be assumed to go well into every situation or organization. An industrial manufacturer may need a different mix of character attributes than an airline, a retailer or a critical care hospital. A collection agency will likely place less value on attributes such as caring and compassion than an organization such as 'Doctors without Borders'. In addition, uniformity is not always desirable. An organization of exclusively highly passionate, courageous individuals may bring with it management challenges which outweigh the benefits. Thus, while certain core character traits are central to all organizations, some must be mixed and matched based on the needs of the specific organization and the situation at hand.

Selecting for character can be done in several ways. Character is a reflection of the choices made by an individual and thus it lends itself well to chronological

interviewing. The interviewer starts at the beginning of the candidate's resume, and explores the choices made throughout the individual's academic and business life. The interviewer seeks to understand what guided the choices, how the outcomes were evaluated and what, if anything, the candidate might have done differently.

When probing the candidate's work history, the interviewer can ask;

- What was the candidate hired to do in that position?
- What were the challenges inherited and how did the candidate go about addressing them. Why were they approached in that manner?
- What are they proudest of in that role, what would they have done differently?
- What was the low point in that role? Why and how did the candidate deal with it?
- What were the people issues and what decisions did the candidate make in dealing with these issues?
- Did the candidate hire anyone, fire anyone? What do they look for in people when they hire and why?
- What would the candidate's immediate supervisor say about them?
- What did the candidate learn about their development needs during that position and what did he or she do to address them?
- Why did the candidate leave?

The interviewer is looking for themes which have cut across and guided the candidate's choices in the past. Such questions also shed valuable light on 'how' the candidate has been successful thus far (eg. working with, over, without or through people). The interviewer can also probe specifically into character attributes by using behavioral questions that start with, 'Give me an example of a time when you were faced with, or you had to deal with...'. Answers to these, along with the accompanying answers to 'why' provide insight into what is important to the candidate and how they are likely to act in the future.

Evidence of character traits can also be sought in a number of less formal ways. One of our clients always asks his administrative assistant to comment on the experience of greeting and escorting a candidate to his office. To him, one judges character not by how someone deals with their supervisors but how that person deals with subordinates, and others who cannot do them any harm. The administrative assistant's comments are always influential in the hiring decision.

Another client insists on a dinner meeting with the final candidate and spouse prior to extending an offer. He wants to shift the candidate into a more social setting in order to observe how he or she behaves and interacts. Considerable insight can be gained in a two to three hour casual conversation covering a wide range of issues and topics.

Following the interview, references should be canvassed including those selected specifically to comment on the candidate's character. Character references have largely faded from our vernacular as it has become popular to believe that they are somehow sullied by familiarity and a lack of impartiality. This is shortsighted for it is exactly familiarity that one wants. Done well, character references leverage questions of 'how' and 'why' to probe far beyond the perfunctory 'he's a good guy' answers to gain a deeper understanding of the fabric of the candidate.

Conclusion

In a recent poll, Canadians ranked the trustworthiness of a wide range of professions. At the top, over 90% of Canadians rated firefighters trustworthy followed closely by nurses and pharmacists. At the bottom, only 7% of Canadians appear to trust either automobile sales staff or national politicians. Corporate CEOs also ranked low with a rating of 20% trustworthiness. When asked to list the criteria they used in making their assessments, Canadians ranked character traits such as integrity, reliability, commitment to promises and fairness as most important.

Character matters. It is the yardstick by which we judge and are judged, the key in unlocking our natural gifts and the compass by which our destinies are set. And character is the cultural DNA of all great companies.

Yet character struggles to assert itself in a changing world where intellect, charisma, credentials, and productivity have become most valued. Headlines scream of a 'War for Talent'. But the spoils of long term success will not

go to the victors of that war. Only Aristotle's virtues of excellence hold that promise, and for those contrarians who see, or remember this, theirs will be an uncontested victory.

About The Author

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