

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Character: Invaluable, But Unmeasurable

by Dr. Mike Armour

My [most recent newsletter](#), which dealt with character and achievement, had an unprecedented response. It resulted in more feedback (consistently positive) and picked up more new subscribers than any newsletter I've ever published.

Many readers apparently resonated with my observation that we tend to praise by citing achievement, but criticize by attacking character. Character praise is almost universally ignored. Even what passes as praise for character is often more nearly praise for personality traits, not character itself.

Nowhere is character praise more lacking than in the workplace. People in all types of professions identified with my comment that job reviews center almost exclusively on achievement, overlooking character issues altogether.

The "Measurability" Test

Several factors contribute to this practice. And one way or another they all connect to "measurability." Only things that are measurable are deemed important. Or at least important enough to get our primary attention in business.

We are taught that goals are to be measurable. We judge a company by its bottom line. We equate level of compensation with level of accomplishment.

Executive teams talk about "hard skills" and "soft skills." The basic distinction is that hard skills have outputs that can be measured. Soft skills do not.

Of the two, hard skills are seen as far more vital. I commonly hear executives speak of "soft skills" derisively. Some go so far as to describe soft skills training a waste of time and money.

The same kind of thinking enters into the formal assessment of employees. Hard skills, not soft skills are what get our attention.

Performance Reviews

Interestingly, we normally refer to these employee assessments as "performance reviews." The name itself suggests that achievement is the only thing that counts.

Which is why character strengths and weaknesses figure so rarely in employee assessments. Achievement is measurable. Character is not.

Companies also build a safety net by emphasizing achievement almost exclusively in employee assessments. In a litigious society, a company can defend its personnel decisions more effectively if it bases them on measurable criteria rather than subjective judgment.

Little wonder, then, that we are prone to review on the basis of achievement. To promote on the basis of achievement. And to fire on the basis of achievement.

Returns on Investment

This tendency becomes even more pronounced when top management demands a demonstrated return on investment for every expenditure. Because it is so difficult to show a direct correlation between soft skills and the bottom line, it's often difficult to justify training and development programs that make workers better people rather than merely better producers.

Yet, most of us know intuitively that companies are far more productive when morale is high and the corporate culture is engaging. We fully expect a company to reach its greatest potential in an atmosphere where workers are self-starters, responsible, and true to their word.

But things like morale and culture are not inherently "measurable." We cannot tie morale and culture directly to bottom line results. We have to assess them by looking at the effects they produce. By the "feel" they yield.

All of which is to say that business and corporate leaders need to rethink the mantra, "If it's not measurable, it's unimportant." Intangibles such as character, constructive attitudes, and a collaborative spirit are invaluable, even if they are not prone to simple measurement.

Many a company has been brought to its knees by character flaws that fueled a disaster. In the shambles and ashes of the aftermath, you would be hard-pressed to find anyone who dismisses the importance of character simply because it's so difficult to measure.

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