

# **LeaderPerfect Newsletter**

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## **In Praise Of Character**

by Dr. Mike Armour

Earlier this month I spent three delightful days with several other professional speakers, including Dr. Beverly Chiodo, one of America's most respected business professors. She is nationally renowned for weaving ethics and character development into her undergraduate and graduate curriculum. And she speaks over 50 times a year on character education.

One of Beverly's principal themes is that we praise personal achievement constantly in America, but rarely praise personal character. And the process starts early in life. From kindergarten onward our schools ascribe grades on the basis of achievement, not on qualities of character.

### **Achievement Obsession**

Given the principle that "you get more of whatever you praise," it's hardly surprising that we've created an achievement-obsessed society. So much so, Beverly contends, that Enron-like scandals are to be expected. They are the natural outflow of celebrating achievement, but relegating character to faint praise.

Reared in that environment, young people enter the business arena believing achievement, not stellar character, will get them rewarded. Will get them to the top. So they are willing to compromise on issues of character in order to make their mark.

Beverly has mounted her own one-woman battle to get teachers and parents to praise character as enthusiastically and frequently as they praise achievement. And for bosses and employers to follow suit.

As I listened to her, it struck me that another American tendency has compounded the problem. While we typically praise achievement, when we criticize it's frequently an attack on character. When people do a good job, we praise the good job. When they do a poor job, we accuse them of character or personality flaws. They are lazy. Or sloppy. Or inattentive to details.

Far too many people find themselves in working and family relationships where they are much more likely to have their character questioned than to have it praised. Because they never get credit for character, they become enslaved to achievement. That's the only way they can manage to get praise.

## Job Reviews

Are you in a job where you get periodic reviews? How much of the review content centers on achievement? By comparison, how much centers on character attributes? And what about the reviews you make of others? Do you put as much emphasis on praiseworthy qualities of character as you do on assessing the goals they've achieved?

And then there's your family circle. How is praise parceled out there? Is the lion's share of praise for achievement? Or is praise balanced between achievement and character?

I'm a firm believer that few people get nearly enough praise. And I'm as guilty as the next person of passing up far too many opportunities to praise. I've resolved to praise more and criticize less. But after my weekend with Beverly, I've added another dimension to my resolve. My goal now is to look for achievements to praise only after I've first looked for character strengths to honor.

## Lessons Learned

As I've experimented with this resolve, I've already learned two valuable lessons. First, I've learned that I'm so conditioned by our achievement-driven society that I note praiseworthy achievement almost instinctively. But when I decide to single out praiseworthy character traits, the process feels far less natural.

Second, I've seen in the eyes of people just how starved they are to be recognized for their strengths of character. When I praise their achievements, they smile broadly, or sometimes sheepishly. But when I praise their character, their eyes light up. They become radiant. Often they literally glow.

So join me in lighting up some lives around you this week. It won't take much. Just make it a point to praise character. Genuinely. Then watch the magic begin.

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