

Character Could Use Some Attention

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Recently I've chosen topics for my podcast from comments I overhear from people about things that genuinely concern them. That's why I just devoted five episodes to accountability. And I'm doing four more programs on that topic in June for Close-Up Radio in New York.

Today I'm taking up another concern which people frequently voice. From what they see in the world around them, they wonder if we put enough emphasis on character. They question the type of character training children receive in school. They voice doubts about whether character is properly emphasized in business. In politics. In society in general.

That concern resonates with me, because for years, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, I worked directly with ministries of education in Russia and Ukraine, helping them to develop new character curriculum for their classrooms. I'll have more to say about that in a moment. In the process, I saw firsthand what happens to a nation and to a society when character development is ignored for decades. And it is not a pretty picture.

Therefore, I want to suggest some very practical things which we can do as leaders to encourage a greater focus on character. For business leaders, it pays dividends. Given the choice, most people prefer doing business with people of character as opposed to those of questionable character. In the same vein, people prefer to follow a leader of character rather than one whose character is flawed.

Consequently, when you take forthright steps to strengthen your own character and promote it in others, you are certain to upsize your leadership.

Nearly 20 years ago I spent three delightful days with several other professional speakers in a mastermind group. One of them was Dr. Beverly Chiodo. I understand that she passed away earlier this year. What a loss!

She was one of America's most respected business professors, nationally renowned for weaving ethics and character development into her undergraduate and graduate curriculum. At the time I met her, she was speaking over 50 times a year on character education.

One of her principal themes was 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. If the praise character at all, it's through good conduct awards. But these awards themselves are more a tribute to how a person performed than his or her underlying character.

After meeting Beverly and hearing her speak in 2004, I took up her theme in the next edition of my leadership newsletter. That issue drew the largest response and led to the most new subscriptions of any I published in the newsletter's 15-year run. People then, as now, were concerned that character development had been relegated to the back burner.

I remember that Beverly pointed to the then-recent Enron scandal as indicative of what occurs when businesses put more emphasis on profits than character. Little did we know that future scandals would one day make Enron pale by comparison.

During his lifetime, Stephen Covey often drew attention to a shift in business literature during the 20th century. Until shortly after the First World War, he would point out, management literature stressed the importance of character as the bedrock of managerial success. By the middle of the century, however, little was being said about character. The emphasis was on techniques for maximizing achievement.

But business literature was not alone in this shift. On every turn there were awards and recognition for achievement, almost none for character. Given the principle that "you get more of whatever you praise," it's hardly surprising that we created an achievement-obsessed society.

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. It's therefore understandable why many are willing to compromise on issues of character in order to make their mark.

Beverly's keynotes on character were part of her one-woman battle to get teachers and parents to praise character as enthusiastically and as frequently as they praise achievement. And for bosses and employers to follow suit.

When she outlined how she made character training part of her classroom courses, I took special note. At the time I was about halfway through a 15-year collaboration with hundreds of Russian educators who had undertaken precisely what Beverly was advocating.

Historically, you see, character training in Russia was the role of the schools, not the home. Under Marxism, however, the government overhauled character curriculum so that it celebrated little more than unswerving allegiance to communist ideals. More traditional qualities of character were considered bourgeois, one of the most derisive terms that Marxists could apply to any set of values.

Meanwhile, the quality of life for average Russians was miserable. Except for the elites, crushing poverty was the way of life. Due to rampant alcoholism, average life expectancy – especially for men – was years below the rest of the industrialized world. Corruption was everywhere. Petty crime was universal. Justice was for sale. At every level of government, officials had their hands out for bribes. I ran into these realities everywhere I went.

Under communism, survival was so difficult that people did whatever it took to stay alive. They violated moral and ethical standards with no pangs of conscience. They became well-practiced at lying and deceit. They pilfered whenever they could. It sometimes seemed that only two values still prevailed after communism. One was the value of survival. The other was the value of family. All other values were negotiable.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, teachers were no longer compelled to use communist curriculum in their character training. They readily abandoned it. Given the moral collapse of their society, they wanted to return to classic norms of the nation's historic Judeo-Christian heritage. But the Soviets had systematically destroyed any printed resource which promoted that heritage. Teachers therefore lacked even the most basic tools to develop their new curriculum. As a result, ministries of education turned to the West and to advisors like me to aid their effort.

I tell you this to say that I've seen firsthand the sordid consequences which befall a culture when it fails to honor the value of character. It's not a pretty picture. Therefore, when Beverly warned against ignoring character, I probably identified with her message more than any other person who ever heard her keynote.

Listening to her that day, I realized that several common practices in our society compound the inattention to character. For one, we typically praise achievement, but criticize by attacking 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 receive praise.

Nowhere is character praise more lacking than in the workplace, in my judgment. If you believe me guilty of overstatement, let me ask a question. When you have a job review, how much of it 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 their praiseworthy character traits as you do on assessing the goals which they've achieved? Judged by our actions, character is not particularly praiseworthy!

Several factors contribute to our lackluster praise of character. And one way or another they all connect to "measurability." In too many businesses today, only things which can be measured are deemed important. Or at least important enough to deserve notable attention.

I've heard management gurus say, "If it can't be measured, it can't be managed." It's a catchy saying, and a pithy one. But it ignores reality. Managers are held accountable for many things which are not quantifiable, at least not directly. Things like the general atmosphere in the workplace. The prevailing mood among the workers. Overall morale and personal initiative. The level of cooperation within the group.

Still, in most business environments, what is measurable takes precedence. Anything of import has a metric attached to it. Goals must be measurable. The measure of a company is its bottom line. Salary compensation is assumed to reflect level of accomplishment.

Executive teams talk about "hard skills" and "soft skills." The basic distinction is that hard skills have outputs which 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 as 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 draw our attention. Interestingly, we normally refer to 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 into employee assessments. Achievement is measurable. Character is not.

Companies also build a legal 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.

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" which 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 quantification.

Many a company has been brought to its knees by character flaws which 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.

Even before Beverly's speech, I firmly believed that few people receive nearly enough praise. Her remarks only furthered my belief. Yet, I'm as guilty as the next person of passing up far too many opportunities to praise. Periodically I must renew my resolve to praise more and criticize less.

But after hearing Beverly, I 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. And that's especially true when I'm preparing someone's job review. I'm determined to applaud their displays of character just as much as the goals which they achieve.

As I've experimented with this resolve, I've already learned two valuable lessons. First, I've discovered 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 requires more conscious effort, more work and reflection.

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, I invite you to join me in lighting up lives around you this week. In your family. Among your friends. Especially with those you lead. It won't take much. Just make it a point to praise character. Genuinely. Then watch magic begin.

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