

L203 Reading A

Servant leadership¹

The United States is experiencing a rapid shift in many businesses and not-for-profit organizations—away from the more traditional autocratic and hierarchical models of leadership and toward servant leadership as a way of being in relationship with others. The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.

The words *servant* and *leader* are usually thought of as being opposites. In 1970, retired AT&T executive Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) deliberately brought those words together in a meaningful way and coined the term servant leadership. In doing so, he launched a quiet revolution in the way in which we view and practice leadership. In the years since that time, many of today's most creative thinkers are writing and speaking about servant leadership as an emerging leadership paradigm for the 21st century. In fact, we are witnessing today an unparalleled explosion of interest in, and practice of, servant leadership. In her groundbreaking book on quantum sciences and leadership, *Rewiring the Corporate Brain* (1997), Danah Zohar goes so far as to state that, "Servant-leadership is the essence of quantum thinking and quantum leadership".

Servant Leadership and Character

Servant leadership seeks to involve others in decision making, is strongly based in ethical and caring behavior, and enhances the growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of organizational life. It is based on two main constructs that speak to the character of the servant leader:

- (1) Ethical behavior
- (2) Concern for subordinates

Our fundamental understanding of character has much to do with the essential traits exhibited by a person. In recent years there has been a growing interest in the nature of character and character education, based upon a belief that positive character traits can be both taught and learned. The nature of character and its relationship to leaders has also taken on increased significance in recent years. Character refers to deep structures of personality that are particularly resistant to change".

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Ten Principles (Characteristics) of a Servant Leader

Principles are fundamental truths or propositions that serve as the foundation for a system of beliefs or behavior or for a chain of reasoning. Unlike values, morals and ethics, which vary greatly between cultures and change over time, principles are unchanging. When a leader develops their leadership style around a principle their actions and behaviors will become characteristic of that principle. The literature on leadership includes a number of different leadership styles and the characteristics associated with them that are practiced by leaders. Much of the leadership literature includes, as an implicit assumption, the belief that positive characteristics can-and-should be encouraged and practiced by leaders. Identified in servant leadership is a set of ten principles or characteristics of the servant leader that are of critical importance. They are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

Listening

Listening is the ability to capture the verbal and nonverbal messages transmitted by another in order to discern their meaning. Leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision-making skills. Although these are also important skills for the servant leader, they need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The servant leader seeks to identify the will of a group and helps to clarify that will. He or she listens receptively to what is being said and unsaid. Listening also encompasses hearing one's own inner voice. Listening, coupled with periods of reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being of the servant leader.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. The servant leader strives to understand and empathize with others. People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. One assumes the good intentions of co-workers and colleagues and does not reject them as people, even when one may be forced to refuse to accept certain behaviors or performance. The most successful servant leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners.

Healing

Healing is the process of overcoming failures and disappointments in order to be made whole or healthy again. The healing of relationships is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant leadership is the potential for healing one's self and one's relationship to others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is a part of being human, servant leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to help make whole those with whom they come in contact.

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Awareness

Awareness is being attuned to one's surroundings and able to extract signs and indicators that help to understand issues and situations in a holistic context. General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Awareness helps one in understanding issues involving ethics, power, and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position.

Persuasion

Another characteristic of servant leaders is reliance on persuasion, rather than on one's positional authority, in making decisions within an organization. Persuasion entails changing the thinking of followers through clear and consistent communication processes and rational influence tactics void of deception and coerciveness. The servant leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant leadership. The servant leader is effective at building consensus within groups. This emphasis on persuasion over coercion finds its roots in the beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)—the denominational body to which Robert Greenleaf belonged.

Conceptualization

Conceptualization is the ability to take a balanced view of the past, present and future in order to identify prospective contingencies and develop long-term strategies to meet individual and organizational goals. Servant leaders seek to nurture their abilities to dream great dreams. The ability to look at a problem or an organization from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. For many leaders, this is a characteristic that requires discipline and practice. The traditional leader is consumed by the need to achieve short-term operational goals. The leader who wishes to also be a servant leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking. Within organizations, conceptualization is, by its very nature, a key role of boards of trustees or directors. Unfortunately, boards can sometimes become involved in the day-to-day operations—something that should be discouraged—and, thus, fail to provide the visionary concept for an institution. Trustees need to be mostly conceptual in their orientation, staffs need to be mostly operational in their perspective, and the most effective executive leaders probably need to develop both perspectives within themselves. Servant leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach.

Foresight

Closely related to conceptualization, the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation is hard to define, but easier to identify. One knows foresight when one experiences it. Foresight is the process of observing current

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events and their consequences for the purpose of developing strategies to successfully predict and mitigate future occurrences. It is a characteristic that enables the servant leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future. It is also deeply rooted within the intuitive mind. Foresight remains a largely unexplored area in leadership studies, but one most deserving of careful attention.

Stewardship.

Peter Block (1993)—author of *Stewardship* and *The Empowered Manager*—has defined stewardship as “holding something in trust for another”. Robert Greenleaf’s view of all institutions was one in which CEO’s, staffs, and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. Servant leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. It also emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion, rather than control.

Commitment to the Growth of People

A commitment to the growth of people is understanding the goals and aspirations of others for the purpose of assisting them in achieving those goals. Servant leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his or her organization. The servant leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything in his or her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues. In practice, this can include (but is not limited to) concrete actions such as making funds available for personal and professional development, taking a personal interest in the ideas and suggestions from everyone, encouraging worker involvement in decision-making, and actively assisting laid-off employees to find other positions.

Building Community

Building community is developing a team bonded by quality relationships and a shared vision that is dedicated to each other’s wellbeing. The servant leader senses that much has been lost in recent human history as a result of the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives. This awareness causes the servant leader to seek to identify some means for building community among those who work within a given institution. Servant leadership suggests that true community can be created among those who work in businesses and other institutions.

Servant leadership principles (characteristics) often occur naturally within many individuals; and, like many natural tendencies, they can be enhanced through learning and practice. Servant leadership offers great hope for the future in creating better, more caring, institutions.

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Love and Leadership Required Leadership Behaviors

Leadership Requires Patience

The definition of patience is to "show self-control." Is this quality of character important for a leader? Not only is it important-it is essential because patience and self-control are the essential building blocks of character, and hence leadership. I believe self-control is better described using the phrase "impulse control." We are teaching impulse control to our little girl every day by coaching her to respond not according to what she "feels" like doing, but according to what is the right thing to do. Without control over our basic desires, whims, appetites, and other urges, we have little hope of behaving with character in difficult situations. A habit must be developed by responding from principles rather than urges in order for us to be effective leaders. In short, we must get our impulses under control. We must get the head (values) in charge of the heart (emotions). Patience and self-control are essential to healthy relationships. If you doubt this, then ask yourself this question, "do you have good relationships with people who are out of control?" Patience and self-control are both about being consistent and predictable in mood and actions. Are you a safe person? Easy to be with? Approachable? Can you handle contrary opinion? Criticism? Now, I am not suggesting that we cannot be passionate in what we do or that we have no emotions. Passion (commitment) is an essential leadership quality that we will discuss later. We can be very passionate in what we do while maintaining our patience and self-control with people. If you are not a safe person for people to readily approach with the bad news as well as the good, look out. I often get people in my seminars who readily admit to having bad tempers and will even admit that they sometimes rage at people and have inappropriate outbursts. They are usually quick to defend their behavior by saying things like "That's just the way I am," or "As you can see, I'm a redhead," or "I'm just like my father was." When I hear this, I usually respond by saying, "So when was the last time you 'lost it' and had a fit with the CEO of the company? How about with a valued customer?" Of course, they answer, "Why, never!" To which I respond, "Isn't it interesting that you can control yourself with the CEO or a customer but not with the people working for you 'Why do you think that is?'" I know of a guy who played adult-league softball for many years after high school. He was a great guy, but unfortunately for the umpires he had a temper that was the joke of the league. If a questionable call was made, he immediately would be yelling and spraying saliva all over the poor ump, usually resulting in ejection from the game. One year, the league hired a new umpire who just happened to be the pastor at a local church. You guessed it. It happened to be the difficult player's pastor. Now, how many games do you think he was thrown out of a game that year? You guessed it again, zero! When asked how he achieved the feat of going a whole season without getting kicked out of a single game, his response was simply "Heck, you can't yell at the pastor." Now, you tell me, are patience and self-control choices? Anger is a natural and healthy emotion, and passion is a wonderful quality to

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possess, as we will see later. However, acting out on anger or passion and violating the rights of others is inappropriate and damages relationships. This is the part that can and must be controlled.

Leadership Requires Kindness

The dictionary definition of kindness is "to give attention, appreciation, and encouragement to people." The second definition listed is "to display common courtesy to others." Kindness is an act of love (verb) because it requires us to reach out to others, to extend ourselves, even to people we may not be particularly fond of. Kindness and common courtesy are about doing the things that help relationships flow smoothly. This includes extending ourselves for others by appreciating them, encouraging them, being courteous, listening well and giving credit and praise for efforts made.

William James, the great American philosopher and psychologist, taught that human beings at the core of their personality have the *need* to be appreciated. Have you been appreciating your kids lately? Your spouse? Your boss? Your employees, who spend one-half of their waking hours giving efforts under your leadership? Your teammates? Mother Teresa often said that people crave appreciation more than they crave bread. Effective leaders encourage those around them to be the best they can be. Effective leaders push, cajole, pull, and encourage others to raise their level of play. They encourage others by their willingness to share their knowledge and experiences and are a constant, positive influence to the people around them. Remember, you don't have to be the boss to encourage and influence others. Common courtesy is doing the little things that make a house a home. Little things like saying please; thank you; I'm sorry, I was wrong. Little things like being the first one to say, "Good morning," in the hallway. Kindness is the WD-40 of human relationships.

Leadership Requires Humility

My dictionary defines humility as "displaying an absence of pride, arrogance, or pretense; behaving authentically." *Humility*, like *love*, is another word that has been butchered in the English language. The opposite of humility is arrogance, boastfulness, or pride. Many people therefore mistakenly associate being humble with being passive, overly modest, self-effacing, or even a "poor pitiful me" type. To the contrary, humble leaders are not afflicted with some unbalanced sense of their inferiority. Humble leaders can be as bold as a lion when it comes to their sense of values, morality, and doing the right thing. They can be as fierce as a pit bull when it comes to staying focused and on mission, hitting margin targets, and holding people accountable. Humble leaders are simply those who have stopped fooling themselves about who they really are. Humble leaders know that they put their pants on the same way as everyone else. They know that they are only a disaster or two away from the bottom of the pile. They know that they came into the world with nothing and will leave with nothing (you will never see a funeral hearse pulling a U-Haul). Humble leaders have gotten over themselves and their terrible twos. Humble leaders have grown up. Humble leaders display willingness, even an eagerness, to listen to the opinions of others

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and are wide open to contrary opinion. Humble leaders know they do not have to have all of the answers, and they are perfectly okay with that. English critic John Ruskin observed, "Really great men have a curious feeling that the greatness is not in them, but through them. Therefore, they are humble." Humble leaders do not take themselves or events too seriously. Humble leaders are able to laugh at themselves and the world, which is so important because people have a need to have fun. Humble leaders are quick to give credit to others and do not seek out credit and adulation for themselves; they are secure in who and what they are. I have met many, many people in leadership positions who seem incapable of saying things like "I don't know," or "What do you think?" or "Challenge my thinking," or "I am sorry, I was wrong," or "You did that much better than I could have." After getting to know these people, I generally find that they are insecure and uncomfortable in their own skins. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins refers to the highest performing level of leadership, what he labels "Level 5," and says, "Level 5 leaders embody a paradoxical mix of personal humility and professional will. They are ambitious, to be sure, but ambitious first and foremost for the company, not themselves." Humble leaders view their leadership as an awesome responsibility. They view leadership as a position of trust and stewardship and take having people entrusted to their care very seriously. They are not focused on their "management rights," nor do they lay awake at night worrying about office politics and who will get the corner office. Rather, they are focused on their leadership *responsibilities* and often lay awake at night thinking about whether they are effectively meeting the needs of their people. Humble leaders are authentic. They do not walk around wearing "I've got it all together" masks. Humble leaders are willing to be open and vulnerable because they have their egos under control and do not operate from delusions of grandeur, believing they are indispensable to their organizations. They are well aware that cemeteries are full of indispensable people. Humble leaders are secure in knowing they have strengths and limitations, knowing full well that there are many others who could do the job as well or better than they could. Humble leaders know they are capable of making errors and are conscious that the greatest fault of all is believing you have none. A wise mystic centuries ago commented, "If we could truly see ourselves for what we really are, we would be very humble indeed. 'Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.'" I once heard a pastor at a funeral say, "Nobody is getting out of this thing alive." Humble leaders are able to keep things in perspective.

Leadership Requires Respect

My dictionary defines respect as "treating people like they are important." The people around the leader know full well that he or she is capable of respecting others, as they see him or her do it every time someone important comes around. But what about the little people or the challenging ones? Do they get that same respect? Ethel Waters, the well-known black singer and actress of the 1920s, was fond of saying, "God don't create no junk, he just creates people with behavior problems." So true, and guess what? You and I have some of those behavior problems, too. I tell people in my seminars, "If you don't think you have any behavior problems that you can work on and improve, put arrogance at the top of your list. And if you still think you have no issues to work on, stand up

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now and we'll have the people on your team point them out to you!" An effective way that leaders can give respect and build trust is by developing the skill of delegating responsibilities to others so they can grow and develop. Proper delegating communicates respect for another person's skills and abilities. Delegating responsibilities is a wonderful way to demonstrate trust, which, of course, is a two-way street. We desire trust from others, we must give trust to them. The discretion and independent judgment we want our people to possess only come by exercising discretion and independent judgment. I once had a seminar participant say to me, "My daddy taught me respect is earned. Therefore, I respect only people who have earned my respect!" "Your daddy lied" was my response. Respect isn't *earned* when you are the leader, respect is *given* when you are the leader. Don't people get respect for being human? Don't people get respect for working for the same organization that you do? In fact, if I was a shareholder, I could argue that the leader's job is to help his or her people win and be successful. The leader will respect them when they earn it? And when might that be? Recall the definition of love. Love is a choice, the willingness to extend oneself for others and seek their greatest good *regardless* of whether they have earned it or have got it coming. Love (leadership) does not pause to create an Excel spreadsheet, putting people's pluses and minuses in columns before hitting the auto sum button to determine if respect is due. Rather, the leader gives respect. The leader *chooses* to treat all people like important people, even when they behave poorly or "don't deserve it." Effective leaders understand that everyone is important and adds value to an organization. And if they do not add value to the organization, whose fault is that? Why are they still there? Again, everyone is important. The only difference is that people have different job responsibilities and the market compensates those responsibilities differently. Put another way, think of servant leadership as *primus inter pares*, translated as "first among equals." Again, Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines: "My mother taught me.... that positions and titles mean absolutely nothing. They're just adornments; they don't represent the substance of anybody. ... She taught me that every person and every job is worth as much as any other person and any other job."

Leadership Requires Selflessness

Selflessness is defined as "meeting the needs of others." What a beautiful definition of leadership: to meet the needs of others. During seminars, I am often asked, "Even before my own needs?" to which I respond, "Even before your own needs, grasshopper." When you signed up to be the leader, that's what you signed up to do. The will to serve and sacrifice for others, the willingness to set aside our wants and needs in seeking the greatest good for others, this is what it means to be selfless. This is what it means to be the leader. I often get challenged about serving others by indignant people who will say, "Yeah, that serving stuff sounds great, but you don't know my boss!" or "You don't know my spouse," or "You don't know the kind of employees I am dealing with!" I generally respond by saying they must work to kick out that "stinkin thinkin'" because they are already on the wrong track! The road to servant leadership lies not in trying to fix or change others but in working on changing and improving ourselves. Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy once remarked, "Everyone wants to change the world, but no one wants to

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change himself" How true! Our world changes when we change. Besides that, we do not have the power to change other people. As Alcoholics Anonymous wisely teaches, the only person you can change is yourself. If each of us cleared the trash from our own yard, we would soon have a clean street.

Leadership Requires Forgiveness

My dictionary defines forgiveness as "letting go of resentment." People often remark that they believe forgiveness to be a strange character skill to have on a leadership list, yet I remain convinced it is one of the most important. Why? Because when you are the leader, people are going to make mistakes, a lot of them. Your boss, your peers, your subordinates, your spouse, your kids, your teammates are going to screw up, make mistakes, and let you down. People will hurt you, sometimes deeply. Many will not make the efforts you believe they should or care as deeply as you do. Some will fail to respond to all the effort you have put in. A few will try to take advantage of you, which is why it is essential for the leader to develop the skill (habit) of accepting limitations in others and the capacity to tolerate imperfection. The leader must develop the skill of letting go of the resentment that often lingers when people hurt us or let us down. After all, anyone could lead perfect people, if only there were any. Letting go of resentment is not about being passive, a doormat for the world. Letting go is not about letting people get away with bad behavior or pretending the bad behavior is acceptable. To do those things would not be behaving with integrity. Rather, forgiveness involves going to people and communicating assertively how what they have done has affected you, dealing with it, and then letting go of any lingering resentment. Buddy Hackett put it well: "While you're carrying a grudge, they're out dancing!" This wonderful quality of character can be developed over time with practice and courage. It can be a difficult skill to develop because when our pride and feelings are hurt, we give ourselves many justifications for not letting people off the hook. It takes a secure, mature individual to develop this skill. As Gandhi once observed, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." I have known many managers who have ruined their careers because their feelings and pride got in the way and they could not forgive others and let go of their resentment. Any decent psychologist will tell you that resentment destroys the human personality. People who harbor resentment, who seek revenge and obsess about what others have done to them get consumed and often become hateful and spiteful human beings. Author Hermann Hesse whose writings inspired Robert Greenleaf, once wrote, "Whenever we hate someone, it is because we hate some part of ourselves in his image. We don't get excited about anything that is not in ourselves." Some may say, "That's easy for you to say. But what if a drunk driver killed your child? What if a maniac murdered your wife? What if your sales guy blew the biggest deal of the year because of something stupid? Would you be so quick to forgive?" I wonder myself but that seems to me a bit like trying to do advanced trigonometry before having learned addition and subtraction. Perhaps we should begin practicing and developing this character habit with the people around us every day rather than worrying about forgiving serial killers. What about practicing with people who have committed lesser atrocities? Perhaps we could forgive a coworker for talking down to us. Or forgive a

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neighbor who behaved poorly one Sunday afternoon. Or let a boss off the hook because he or she embarrassed you in a moment of anger last year. Or cut a family member some slack after holding a grudge for thirty years.

Leadership Requires Honesty

My dictionary defines honesty as "being free from deception." Few would disagree that honesty and integrity are essential qualities of character that a leader must possess. Surveys have shown for decades that these are the qualities of character people most want in their leader. If you do not believe that these qualities are essential to leadership, just ask yourself this question: Do you have good relationships with people you do not trust? Are those the people who inspire you? Trust is the glue that holds relationships together. If my wife and I do not have fundamental trust in our relationship, it would be difficult if not impossible for our organization (marriage) to survive. Without trust, an organization is a house of cards without the glue. How does one build trust? By being trustworthy, of course. Behaving with honesty and integrity builds trust. I have been in many, many organizations whose executives talk about trust but whose actions betray what they truly believe. Their true beliefs are visible in the form of time clocks, secret meetings, volumes of working rules, special keys to certain doors only for special people, nondisclosure of financial information (including salary information), and on and on. Organizations often talk about being like a "family" and then fire or lay off people in the late afternoon so as to avoid a "scene." Then comes a deafening silence for days following the event. One of our "greatest assets" just disappears, and nothing is said! How dysfunctional would you consider a family to be if people just started disappearing from the dinner table and nothing was said except for the occasional "Daddy and Johnny mutually agreed that Johnny should leave"? A major aspect of honesty and being free from deception is in how we hold people accountable for their actions. If we fail to do so, we are not leading honestly, because accountability is our responsibility as leaders, along with helping people be the best they can be. It is deceptive behavior because failure to hold people accountable creates an illusion that everything is okay, and everything is *not* okay. We will spend much of the next chapter discussing accountability and its fundamental importance to leadership. Another form of honesty, one that organizations do not talk nearly enough about, is being free from duplicitous behavior like gossip, backstabbing, and pairing. I see these behaviors running rampant in institutions all over America. It's as if people get a job and now they have license to backstab and character assassinate others at will. Is this honest behavior? Pairing is a destructive alliance between two or more people. These are people who like to break off and talk about the group rather than bringing issues to the group so they can be dealt with. This behavior is hugely destructive to the team and is dishonest. I tell people that if they are engaged in duplicitous behavior as described above, it is like eating double cheeseburgers and drinking triple chocolate malts on their character diet." They are damaging their character, and everyone is watching.

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Leadership Requires Commitment

My dictionary defines commitment as "sticking to your choice." I believe that commitment is perhaps the most important character quality a leader can possess. I say this because behaving consistently with the character qualities described in this chapter will be accomplished only through a strong and solid commitment. I have found the best servant leaders to be very committed people in whatever they have chosen to do. Servant leadership requires commitment and passion for personal and organizational continuous improvement. It requires a passion for doing what you say you are going to do following through on promises, and finishing what is started. It requires a passion for doing the right thing and being the best you can be. It requires a passion for helping others along their journey to be the best they can be. Indeed, leaders should not ask others to be the best they can be unless they are committed to being the best *they* can be. Commitment is also about being loyal to people on the team and being there for others when they fail or when they need your help. Commitment does *not* mean blind loyalty, doing the right thing always trumps loyalty. I once had an executive say to me, "When they want us to do good, they ask us to have integrity, and when they want us to do bad they ask us to have loyalty." How sad. Commitment is having the moral courage to do the right thing regardless of friendships or other alliances. Moral courage is an inner strength, the will to listen to the inner voice of conscience and the will to do the right thing even if it is unpopular or comes with personal risk. Moral courage is the resolve to subordinate anything that gets in the way of doing the right thing. Martin Luther King Jr. put moral courage in perspective when he stated, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy."

Separating People from Their Behavior

If you have ever taken a human resources course on constructive discipline, you've probably heard the instructor make statements that sound silly and nonsensical on the surface. Comments like "When you discipline an employee, you must separate the person from his or her behavior." Usually someone in the audience will respond, "Separate the person from his behavior? How stupid is that? He's the jerk who did it, fire him!" Of course, what the instructor means is that we all do bad things but aren't necessarily bad people. For example, you should not say to an employee, "You're stupid!" Exactly how is an employee supposed to fix that? Do you have some IQ pills in the first aid box? Rather, you should say, "The report you submitted does not meet our standards here." Now *that* is something the employee can do something about. You don't say to an employee, "You're lazy!" Rather, "You have been tardy four times this month." *That* is something the employee can do something about. Theologians often refer to this as "separating the sin from the sinner," which I must admit I once believed to be a rather silly distinction. Silly until I realized there was one person on the planet with whom I do that routinely.

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Character

Character is a word that has been getting a lot of attention in recent years. Not long ago, there was fierce debate over the importance of character as it relates to leadership. Some even suggested that personal character has nothing to do with leadership. Were you buying into that idea? If you do not believe character is important to leadership, just ask yourself these questions: Do people of low character have influence with you and inspire you to action? Do you have good relationships with people of low character? Character is a much used word, especially around election time, but an often misunderstood concept. To better understand character, we need to first differentiate between character and personality

Personality

The word *personality* comes from the Latin word *persona*, originally used to denote the masks worn by theatrical players in ancient Greek dramas and which came to encompass the actor's role as well. Personality could be described as the mask we wear for the world to see. Most psychologists today agree that one's personality has developed and is pretty well fixed by the age of six. There are many personality profiling systems and other tools available to measure personality and the different temperaments, dispositions, and relational styles. For example, DISC is a well-known tool that measures the four primary relational styles: D for dominance, I for influencing, S for steadiness, and C for conscientious. There is quite a bit of scientific support for these four basic styles, and most of us are a complex combination of all of them with usually two dominant styles. Personality types range from extroverted to introverted, outgoing to shy, type A to type B, aggressive to passive, humorous to dry, resilient to reactive, charming to boring, challenger to negotiator, et cetera. Personality can include a superficial "social image" that people display, like charm, graciousness, and charisma. However, what you see may not be what you get. We have all known people whose character was not consistent with their personality. As Socrates put it more than twenty three hundred years ago, "The greatest way to live with honor in this world is to be the person we pretend to be." Personality has little to do with leadership because leadership is not about *style*. Rather, leadership is about *substance*. Personality deals with style while character deals with substance. I have met excellent leaders who were right-brained, left-brained, tall, short, fat, thin, articulate, inarticulate, assertive, timid, charismatic, boring, dressed for success, and dressed for failure. Look at the great leaders in history, and you will find a full spectrum of leadership styles ranging from Tom Landry to Vince Lombardi, from General Bradley to General Patton, from Mary Kay Ash to Lee Iacocca, from FDR to Ronald Reagan, and from Martin Luther King Jr. to Billy Graham. Each had a very different style and personality yet was effective in his or her own unique way.

Character

Dwight Moody, the nineteenth-century lay evangelist, once remarked, "Character is what a man is in the dark." The word *character* comes from a Greek verb meaning, "to engrave." "A person's character, then, is the

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visible sign of his inner nature. Character is what we are beneath our personality (mask). As stated earlier, personality is generally set by the age of six, but not so with character. Our character is a moving target that in healthy human beings should continue to grow and develop throughout life, hence the term *maturity*. Character is of higher importance than personality, as evidenced by the fact that society does not usually hold people accountable for their personality traits but certainly does hold them accountable for their behavior (character). Character, then is something very different from personality. Character is our moral maturity, which is our willingness to do the right thing even when, perhaps *especially* when, it costs us something. In fact, I am not sure it can be an act of character unless it costs us something. Indeed, our true character is revealed when the price of doing the right thing is more than we are willing to pay. Character is our moral and ethical strength to behave according to proper values and principles. The difficult part of life is not *knowing* what is right but *doing* what is right. Again, our character is our level of commitment to doing the right thing, which explains why leadership is "character in action." Leaders seek to do the right thing. I don't know about the wars and demons you fight every day, but I have to tell you that I have wars going on in my gut every day. I am constantly fighting battles between what I *want* to do and what I *ought* to do. I war against what I know I should do and the shortcut I may want to take today. As stated before, I regularly war with that two-year-old inside me who wants his way. Developing character is winning those battles repeatedly, until it begins to become habit. Remember, anyone can love people he or she likes. Anyone can kiss up to the important people. Even the most despicable people on the planet are capable of that. There is an old saying that you can judge people's character by how they treat people who can do nothing for them. Again, leadership (character) is doing the right thing even when we do not feel like it, perhaps *especially* when we do not feel like it. Again, the message I hope you will fully internalize is that leadership development and character development are one.

Nurture and Nature

There is little doubt that the good and bad habits that become our character are strongly *influenced* by both heredity and environment. Influenced, yes; determined, no. We know that identical twins with the same genes and reared in the same environment grow up to become two very different people. Even more dramatic are conjoined twins with the same genes same environment, and even the same *body* who are often two very unique and surprisingly different people. The "raw materials" of our genetic personalities and the environment we were subjected to growing up vary greatly from one person to the next. For example, the person who has an outgoing personality coupled with a wonderful, loving, and supportive childhood has distinct advantages over the person who is saddled with a more melancholy personality coupled with an abusive, unloving childhood. Yet examples abound of people raised in horrible circumstances who chose to rise far above their circumstances, become excellent leaders, and build wonderful lives for themselves and their families. Examples also abound of people who were given everything in childhood and who had every privilege and advantage yet chose to live shameful lives. Yes, it is true that some of us will have to work harder than others according to the hand we have been dealt and the

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raw materials we have to work with. Similarly, "natural" or "gifted" athletes, musicians, students, and leaders may have to put in less practice time than others. We all have predispositions and handicaps that can become obstacles to our character development. Some choose to overcome their obstacles; some choose not to. But in the end, what we are, the person we have become is to a great extent the result of our choices, past and present. To be sure, our future growth and development requires us to be mature enough to accept this responsibility, because if we are unwilling to accept responsibility for our past, we probably will be unwilling to accept responsibility to create our future. Our present state is a product of our past and present choices, but it need not be the dictator of our future state. Our future state, our future character will be determined by the choices we make today and tomorrow. The good news is that we can choose to be something different, starting today.

Character is Habit

Simply put, character is the sum total of our habits, our personal assortment of virtues and vices. Character is knowing the good, doing the good, and loving the good the habits of the mind, the habits of the will, and the habits of the heart. Aristotle wrote, "Moral virtue comes about as a result of habit.... We become what we repeatedly do. We become *just* by doing *just acts*, *self-controlled* by doing *self-controlled acts*, *brave* by doing brave acts." As I stated before, we have been teaching character to *our* little eight-year-old for seven years now. Over and over and over and over again! "Be patient, don't interrupt, be nice, be a good listener, don't be arrogant, think about others, forgive, be honest, follow through," and on and on. You think it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks? Those "puppies" are pretty rough, too! In summary, we are creatures of habit, and our choices add up to this being we call "me." The ancient adage says it well: Thoughts become actions, actions become habits, habits become our character, and our character becomes our destiny. Put another way, character may determine our fate (destiny), but character is not determined by fate. Our character is determined by our choices.

Building Character

Traditionally, character was built upon the three-legged- stool metaphor. One leg represented the home, where children learned and internalized moral beliefs and moral habits through years of loving discipline. The second and third legs of the stool represented the local school and the local community where students or members were held to high behavior standards. For many decades, it seemed as though everyone was pretty much on the same page. Getting in trouble at school or next door probably meant getting it worse at home. Teaching and assisting our children in developing their character habits is one of the very best gifts parents can impart to their children. As psychologist William James put it, "Could the young but realize how soon they will become 'mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. . . .Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its ever so little scar." Aristotle agreed: "The habits we form from childhood make no small difference rather, they make all the difference." We praise talent in this country and reward it handsomely. Yet I am

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convinced that excellent character is much more to be recognized and praised than talent. Why? Many of the outstanding gifts that people possess are to an extent, sometimes to a great extent, "God-given" or natural talents and abilities. A well-developed character, on the other hand, is a unique person forged out of his or her own raw material, however flawed or damaged, choice by choice, day by day, year by year. A unique person molded through hard work, courage, commitment, and making the right choices even when those choices were difficult or unpopular.

My Friend Elizabeth

I would like to close this section on character by sharing a personal experience I will never forget. One of my favorite people on the planet died a couple of years ago. Her name was Elizabeth Morin, a wonderful elderly woman whom my wife and I chose as our "adopted" grandmother many years ago. Elizabeth was eighty-nine when she died but was one of the most alive people I have ever known. She was not cynical about the world nor did she think she had "arrived" and had everything figured out. She was always open to new ideas and ways of doing things. She was a quiet woman, even shy; but when she did speak, people who knew her well would listen closely because she would often make wise, even profound, comments. The trouble was you had to be listening *closely* to catch it. I went to visit Elizabeth in the hospital when she was dying, and I was quite sad, to say the least. While she was consoling *me*, she said she wanted to share something with me that she had learned about character now that she was dying. It was just like Elizabeth to give me a gift before she went home. The discussion went something like this: "Jim, now that I am dying, my old friends are all coming to see me." "Yes, I know Elizabeth, people have been waiting in line halfway down the hospital corridor for days now." She thought for a moment and then said something I will never forget: "Jim, you know my older friends are like they were when they were younger, only more so." Did you catch that? Since I had not been listening *closely* enough either, I had to ask, "What do you mean, Elizabeth?" "Well, those of my friends who were selfish and self-centered thirty years ago, well, you ought to see them now. They come in my room, sit by my bed, talk about themselves and their problems for ninety minutes, and then leave. I am left wondering why they came. "But the ones who were on a good path thirty years ago? The ones who cared about others and gave of themselves? You should see them now Jim, Saints." Green and growing or ripe and rotting. I sure miss Elizabeth. The choices we make on a daily basis have not only determined who we are today but are determining who we will be tomorrow. Again, author C. S. Lewis: "That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible."

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Habits

The Anatomy of a Habit

William James called human beings "bundles of habits. "To further understand the forces at work when one is truly committed to change, it is important to understand the dynamics involved in developing and breaking these habits that have such a tight grip on our lives. Habits predictably will travel through four stages before becoming the "default" response in our behavior. Let's take a brief look at these four stages.

Stage One: Unconscious and Unskilled

The first stage is the unconscious and unskilled stage, at which we have no knowledge and are oblivious to the skill or behavior. This is pre-potty training; before that first drink or cigarette; before learning to ski, play basketball, play the piano, type, read, write, or become a better leader. In this stage, you are either unaware or uninterested in the behavior and are therefore unskilled.

Stage Two: Conscious and Unskilled

This is the stage at which we become aware of a new behavior but have not yet developed the skills and habits necessary to perform well on a consistent basis. This is when Mom first starts suggesting we get on that big white commode (how unnatural, Mommy!); when we smoke that first cigarette, drink that first awful alcoholic drink, fall twenty times the first time we try to ski down the slope, begin playing the piano, learn to type, et cetera. Stage two is the awkward stage, and this awkwardness must be resisted when we are on our path to growth and improvement. If we do not resist the awkward feelings, we will often give up. For the leader, this awkwardness may occur when he or she first starts to hold people accountable, starts appreciating people for their efforts, or begins treating *employees* with respect rather than just his or her boss. It can feel awkward, uncomfortable, and even intimidating, and those feelings must be resisted and worked through, which is why commitment is so important.

Stage Three: Conscious and Skilled

This is the stage at which we are becoming more and more skilled and comfortable with the new behavior, and it is becoming a skill and even a habit. This is when the child rarely has an accident making it to the bathroom; when the cigarettes or booze are tasting pretty good, snow skiing feels a lot less awkward, and the typist and pianist rarely, if ever, need to look at their fingers on the keyboard anymore.

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This is the "getting the hang of it" stage. We still have to think about it to some degree, push ourselves to action, continue practicing, but it's becoming more "natural."

Stage Four: Unconscious and Skilled

The final stage is when we don't have to "think" about it anymore because the behavior has become habit and very natural. Indeed, the behavior has become our "second nature." Do we have to "think" about brushing our teeth in the morning? I hope not. Does a skilled typist or pianist "think" about which keys to strike? Stage four is the chain-smoker who has three cigarettes burning in three different ashtrays, the alcoholic, or the skier who goes down the slope as naturally as he or she walks down the street. Stage four is the leader who doesn't have to *try* to be a good leader because he or she has *become* a good leader.

Habits, both good and bad, take time to develop, and they take time to break. My experience working with leaders and character change is that it takes a minimum of six months to begin extinguishing an old character habit until the new response has become the "default" response. And this is a minimum. We may even struggle with certain serious habits for many years.

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