



The Character Card, Part II

Must-know tips to sharpen your moral & ethical edge

In my February On Point column, I wrote about the distinctiveness of character. We don't have complete control over most of our attributes. We don't choose our physical or athletic abilities. We don't choose our mental capacity. Certainly we can work on those attributes to improve what we have, but we begin with a given potential. Not so with character. It's a choice.

At the Pointman Leadership Institute, we define character as a combination of one's ethics, morals and values. *Our official definition:* "Character is the result of a consistent, disciplined application (*ethics*) of the *morals* (absolutes) one has chosen (*values*) to pursue." The U.S. Military Academy at West Point defines *character* as "those moral qualities that constitute the nature of a leader and shape his or her decisions and actions."

In my opinion, your character defines you more accurately than any of your other attributes. Among other things, character determines your willingness to work hard, keep your commitments and be trusted with responsibility. Therefore, wise bosses hire, promote and make assignments with character as a primary consideration.

Those of us interested in securing a better position or being promoted to higher responsibility must give attention to developing our own character. Most of us understand that continuing education and training are a must. But it's easy to overlook the continuing development of what can be our most prized asset—our character.

Honing Character

The continual development of one's character can be compared to the

sharpening of a valuable knife. Professional hunters know that a treasured knife, made from the best of steel, requires sharpening after use. The use of the knife during the dressing of the game wears away the keenness of the edge of the blade. In a similar way, our daily exposure to the rough and coarse contacts of our profession can erode the keen edge of our integrity, diligence and discipline. *Face it:* The police profession can be abrasive to one's character.

The most important step in character development is the choice to make it a matter of our attention. A conscious decision to keep a sharp edge on your character is almost certain to begin the process. Once this decision is made, I recommend taking the following steps:

- 1. Determine which character traits are relevant and appreciated.** People appreciate certain behaviors on the part of their leader. Among those are decisiveness, keeping commitments, fairness, being a good listener, consistency, giving recognition, emphasizing principles—not just rules—admitting when wrong and leading by example.
- 2. Prepare a list of the character traits you believe will facilitate the above desired behavior.** *Example:* Our institute has selected integrity, courage, diligence, humility, discipline, loyalty, optimism and conviction.
- 3. Prepare expanded definitions of character traits.** This will require research and heavy thought. *Example:* With *integrity*, the person's actions match stated beliefs and they exhibit oneness as opposed to duplicity, tell the truth, are consistent, predictable, trustworthy, and keep promises. This process of thoroughly

defining the target character traits alone can be invaluable.

- 4. Set up a system for accountability.** Select a few people with whom you have regular interaction. For you brave ones—your peers and/or subordinates. Announce your goals, define your terms and ask for their feedback. Invite them to bring to your attention when you violate your commitment. You can even prepare a before/after questionnaire about your progress—commonly called a 360 evaluation. I posted a sign in my office that reads, "Bad News Welcome Here." The candid feedback I received was sometimes hurtful, but ultimately very helpful.
- 5. Document the above steps in a 30–60 day plan.** Specify the actions you'll take with a due date. *Example:* "I will prepare a list of the character traits I want to sharpen by July 1, 2010." (Peter Drucker said that an objective without a due date is worthless.) Then journal your progress.

Conclusion

Valuable assets have a high price. Sharpening the edge of one's character requires a commitment of time, heavy thinking and plain old hard work. Your character is an asset that's worth the cost of the development process. The crisis of our day is leadership. The crisis in leadership is character, and leadership is more about who you are than what skills you possess.—On Point. **LOM**

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