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THE CHARACTER X FACTOR IN SELECTING LEADERS: *Beyond ethics, virtues, and values*

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Abstract

This paper discusses a model for leading with character, referred to as the character X factor. This model suggests that in order for leaders to lead with character, they must be aware of the tension between two seemingly positive traits, of conflicting virtues. Specifically, they must be aware of the tensions between humility and conviction, reluctance and courage, and vulnerability and integrity. Each of these six traits is ideal to a certain extent, but we argue that it is possible to have too much of a good thing. These virtues are ideal in moderation, but in excess may hamper leader performance. This balancing act of conflicting virtues is what defines leaders of character. The paper concludes with considerations of how to interview and select leaders with this character X factor.

Introduction

There is no doubt that selecting competent leaders is important. We need people who have the skills and competencies to get the job done. However, hiring manager after hiring manager will tell you that hiring based on competency alone is a horrible trap. We are lured by track records of results and leadership competencies, and the hope that a person will produce for us, and produce fast. So why is it so dangerous to stop the conversation with competence? The fact is that a hiring decision that may have taken days or weeks to make, based solely on skills and competencies, can take several more weeks and even months to undo. And, the sad truth is that hiring a competent person with questionable character can be more damaging than hiring a less competent person who may be the right person in

other ways. Stated differently, would you rather hire a competent snake, or an incompetent angel? We would obviously love to hire competent angels, but the fact is that the snake is tempting, and we simply don't have time to fall into the competency trap.

The danger is that we begin to think of the process of selecting people for jobs more as stuffing competencies and skills into those jobs, and not human beings. Rather than hire leaders on competence alone, organizations must be looking for something more. Competence is about the ability to perform and get it done (Competence, 2010). However, leaders with the right stuff are more than what they do. Who they are, how they deal with difficulty and challenge, and work through the complex realities of leading are just as, if not more important, than what they do. This is the essence of character, or "who we are on the inside" (Gavin et al., 2003, p. 169). But, if character is about who we are, how do we evaluate the character of a person? How would we capture who a person is in a normal job interview, and what would we be looking for? What is that X factor and how will we know it when we see it? Character is certainly more than a list of virtues, values, and ethics. Character, especially as it relates to leadership, is inherently complex, paradoxical, and occurs and develops through relationships, challenging experiences, and situations where the answers aren't always clear. For that reason, we are suggesting that our current definitions of character, while valuable in starting the conversation, must be further developed to capture the complex nature of the character of a person, how they make decisions, and how they deal with the realities of life and work. This will increase the possibility that better selection decisions will be made and the right leaders chosen to lead.

A review of the research on character highlights the fact that character is not easily understood. There are many definitions of character. However, most center on the idea of doing what is morally right. For example, Likona (1991) defines character as the ability to do what is right despite external pressures to do otherwise. Moreover, character involves three components —moral knowing, feeling, and action. That is, before leaders can act in the right way, they must first know *what* that right way is. Likewise, they must also feel compelled to act in such ways —to feel convicted. It seems, then, that character is partially reflected in the decisions we make, what we decide to do, and how we decide to act.

The decisions we make are often interpreted as yes or no, this or that, to do it or not to do it, etc. Moreover, what we decide to do or how we decide to act is ultimately an indication of virtue. Virtue is derived from the Latin word *virtus* meaning "strength" (Cawley, Martin, & Johnson, 2000). To act with character is to reveal virtue (McCullough & Snyder, 2000), especially during times of stress. It is times of stress that test leaders because their instinct is to react in ways that minimize that pressure, often in ways that lack thought, foresight, and acting with conviction (McKenna & Yost, 2004). But, what does acting with character look like? How is virtue revealed in the decisions we make? Several virtues have been associated with character, and one who possesses these character virtues — or strengths — is thought to possess character. In particular, courage, integrity, and humility are often included as core components of character. While many other virtues have been associated with character such as cooperativeness, self-responsibility, and self-transcendence (Sperry, 1999), it is our intention to highlight the necessity of viewing character virtues as interconnected, interdependent, and each as necessary, but not sufficient on its own.

First, there is *courage* (Barker & Coy, 2003; Hartman, 2006; Leonard, 1997; Sarros & Barker, 2003; Sarros, Cooper, & Hartican, 2006). Courage is defined as setting a direction

for the long term and taking people in that direction without being hampered by fear (Sarros & Barker, 2003). Courage allows us to take a stand, to move, and to act in spite of fear.

Then, there is *integrity*, which is often thought to be an important piece of what it means to be a person of character. Integrity is described as a consistent adherence to a moral, ethical code, or standard (Barlow et al., 2003). A person with integrity consistently chooses to do the "right thing" when faced with alternative choices. Integrity has also been defined as staying true to universal moral standards independent of social norms or society's standards (Leonard, 1997).

Another virtue that is consistently noted as a part of character is *humility*. Humility has been defined as the quality of being humble or a modest sense of one's own significance (Sarros & Barker; Leonard, 1997; Likona, 1991). Humility is grounded in our willingness to see our limitations, to take responsibility for our mistakes, and see ourselves as valuable, but yet not better than others. When you consider courage, integrity, and humility together, it becomes apparent that they are interdependent parts of a person. Any of these virtues on its own represents something that character is not. Courage without humility or integrity becomes careless. Integrity without courage and humility becomes rigid. And even humility, without courage and integrity, becomes martyrdom.

Character has been referred to as the standard pattern of thought and action with respect to one's own and others' well-being and other major concerns and commitments (Hartman, 2006). Character includes consideration for the health and wellness of not only yourself, but of others and your organization. It is an understanding and fulfillment of your own needs, wants, and convictions, and a connection to the needs, wants, and convictions of others (McKenna & Yost, 2004). But, what is this "standard pattern of thought and action"? Where did the standards originate? Who defines what is right? A comprehensive definition of character must include the criteria against which we evaluate those standards.

Finally, character most certainly includes *personal integrity* (Gardner, 2007; Gavin et al., as cited in Sarros & Cooper, 2006). That is, an individual with integrity is undivided in his or her fundamental beliefs and attitudes, presenting those values to everyone. However, what happens when a person's integrity is confronted by the realities of multiple beliefs and perceptions and by the realities of working and leading in complex organizational systems made up of diverse people with a diversity of opinions? These complex realities, presented to a leader as multiple tensions and dilemmas in the reality of being human, are the foundation upon which we are building our case for a more complex, and yet more realistic, understanding of character.

The Paradox of Character in Context

Paradox is a constant reality for leaders who are responsible for the work and development of someone else (Manz, Anand, Joshi, & Manz, 2008; McKenna, 2008). Thought and action do not happen in a relational or personal vacuum, but in the context of complex human relationships. Although we are encouraged to assess our actions and behaviors by comparing them to a moral standard, and to use that standard as a guide to dictate action, character also includes the awareness of when it is time to allow ourselves to be pulled in the other direction. The tension between your convictions and those of others is constantly at play. When do you decide to adhere to your personal convictions, and when do you decide to let context and environment shape your actions?

3

Clearly, character development happens in the context of the socialization process (Hogan & Sinclair, 1997). In other words, character is knowing when to adjust or accommodate to rules and expectations, and when and how to respond to social expectations (Leonard, 1997). Moreover, because one's environment is constantly changing, it is sensible to presume that character is ever-evolving and developing. Like children first taught right and wrong in the context of the homes in which they were raised, what is right and wrong may change depending on the mission and vision of the organizations in which they work. This is what separates character from ethics. Ethics is defined as "the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation" (Ethics, 2010). It is focused on making the "right" decision and taking the "right" action in a particular setting or situation. Character is more complex in that it develops through experiences that have imprinted on a person and culminates in the way they show up in the daily events of their world. What a person learns about how he or she should act or behave in social or interpersonal situations may vary. For this reason, character selection and development is better defined in the context of an awareness of the inherent tensions in the experience of leaders, rather than the simple adherence to a common set of virtues. The key is knowing what values or virtues are malleable and open to revision (states), and which ones are set in stone (traits), regardless of the context.

Selecting for Character

Unfortunately, when we evaluate candidates for leadership positions, we do a much better job assessing competence than we do assessing character. Because of the various tensions that exist, it becomes tricky to evaluate a leader for character. What we are really looking for is an awareness of the inherent tensions in leading, and a willingness to weigh the possibilities, and take personal responsibility for success and failures. The problem is that we often create systems where it is virtually impossible for a person to take responsibility for past failures without presenting himself as weak or incompetent. To complicate leadership selection even more, we often fail to accurately define our selection criteria when it comes to character, or we err on the side of linear lists of character virtues and ignore the paradoxical components of character. In addition, candidates often project an image they think we want to see — a projection of their competence and a picture of their character that fits with our internal working model (Sarros et al., 2006). They may portray a certain version of themselves. We are all guilty of this. We project ourselves differently depending on who we are around; we have our parent selves, our son or daughter selves, our friend selves, our spouse selves, our employee selves, and our leader selves. Many selection processes aren't sufficiently discerning to sniff out false character from persons representing themselves true to their characters (Levashina & Campion, 2007).

> Character is something you cannot perform, so we can separate performance from the assessment of character. Character goes beyond the content of the problem and deeper into the context of ourselves in relationship to ourselves, to the people around us, and to our experiences. How we see our reality is just as important as how we perform.

4

In spite of the difficulties in defining the complexity of character and in accurately assessing it when we see it, there is hope. Character is something you cannot perform, so we can separate performance from the assessment of character. Character goes beyond the content of the problem and deeper into the context of ourselves in relationship to ourselves, to the people around us, and to our experiences. How we see our reality is just as important as how we perform. While we are not suggesting that character is a random mix of virtues and values that are at the whim of the particular convictions of the leader, we are suggesting that character must be considered as the product of a set of conflicting virtues — or tensions. These tensions are the building blocks of a person's character, representing the realities of living and leading as a human being.

The Character Model

Our review of the current literature on character highlights its complexity as a part of the human experience, and in leadership specifically. This theme is centered on tension — tension between right and wrong, what to do and what not to do, strengths and weaknesses, yourself versus others, and ultimately, person versus organization (Amado & Elsner, 2007; Huxham & Beech, 2003; Manz et al., 2008). It is not just about acting one way vis-à-vis another, but about the process: what is going on inside you that compels you to act a certain way. What are you thinking? What costs and benefits are you weighing? What is pulling you in either direction? For example, when you have your own reputation on the line, how do you sacrifice that for the sake of doing what is right? How do you balance doing what you want to do or even should do for yourself with doing what you want to do or should do for others?

While character certainly includes significant moral components (Hartman, 2006; Hogan & Sinclair, 1997), our purpose here is not to define those components, but to rebuild the foundations upon which character is built. We strongly suggest that the character of a person is deeply connected to the concepts of service, sacrifice, compassion, and the value of others. However, our focus here is on the tensions that have been underplayed in our current definitions of character. Ultimately, character is the *awareness* of the inherent tensions in the human experience and a willingness to act on that awareness in potentially sacrificial ways. These tensions are present regardless of where you work. They transcend any organization's values or mission. The set of inherent contradictions fall between dimensions that are more solid, clear, realistic, and grounded in the strength of a person, and dimensions that are permeable, connected, open, and grounded in the reality of being human, fearful, hopeful, and having made mistakes but not necessarily being defined by them. To that end, it is our hope to identify several of these character tensions and highlight the strengths of creating a more holistic paradigm for studying, selecting, and developing leaders of character.

PERMEABILITY OF CHARACTER	STRENGTH OF CHARACTER
Humility	Conviction
Reluctance	Courage
Vulnerability	Integrity

Humility vs. Conviction

Humility is the state of being humble, or of having a modest sense of one's own significance (Sarros & Barker; Leonard, 1997). It is characterized by other-oriented, pro-social, altruistic motives, modesty, willingness to honestly accept strengths and weaknesses, and not act or feel prideful, arrogant, or narcissistically entitled (Worthington Jr., 2008). But, the reality is that humility, in the life and character of a leader, is always in healthy tension with a clear and convicted voice that comes from the leader. Conviction is different from courage in that it is not necessarily about having the guts to make the tough decisions and to act in spite of fear, but more about what your gut is telling you is that right thing to do (Conviction, 2010). Conviction is that clear sense of what the leader wants to see happen, and of what matters to her.

In many ways, conviction is what makes humility interesting. In spite of the fact that a leader knows what he wants, he is still willing to admit that he has weaknesses, and that he is no better than anyone else. It is a fine line between being seen as convicted and humble, but neither arrogant nor submissive. Whether or not a leader is viewed as convicted or arrogant, humility or submissiveness can have important implications for those he or she leads. In leaders, we want individuals who can do the job well, but if they are not performing, we want them to feel comfortable admitting they need help. If they make a mistake, we want them to have the courage to take responsibility. In the same way, humility makes conviction interesting because without humility, a leader's conviction becomes dangerous, overly confident, and open to the possibility of trampling others through blame, power-mongering, and a blind sense of confidence in the leader's wants and desires.

Reluctance vs. Courage

Possibly the most important tension from which a leader's character is built is between the tensions of courage and reluctance. As stated earlier, courage is defined as setting a direction for the long term and taking people in that direction without being hampered by fear (Sarros & Barker, 2003). But, the courage to act in a certain way, absent a realistic connection to what there is to fear, is only half of what we are suggesting character is about. Courage without fear is not courage at all, but simply blind, bullish action. Courage requires an awareness of fear, and the willingness to act in spite of that fear. By that definition, taking a direction or stand without being hampered by fear is not enough. True courage is about action in the presence of fear. Therefore, it is necessary to consider courage in healthy tension with something else — a sense of reluctance about taking an action or direction.

Leadership reluctance includes a healthy sense of the stakes in the job of leading. Or stated another way, reluctance is a connection to the high stakes for followers and for leaders themselves. There is always some cost that may have to be paid for any decision we make. Leaders who are connected to those stakes must be given permission to communicate both courage and conviction, and a healthy sense of reluctance. In many cases, the worst hiring decisions we could make would be based on courage alone. Giving leaders the freedom to communicate a healthy reluctance to lead in the same space as the courage to lead gives us insight into the very real complexity of any leader as a human being. Stated differently, we need leaders who want the job, but understand the potential costs that they or others may have to pay.

Vulnerability vs. Integrity

As suggested earlier, leaders with integrity are undivided (Sarros & Barker, 2003; Sarros & Cooper, 2006) and have a sense of structural strength and completeness as to who they are. Like a building with structural integrity, leaders whose character has integrity are often unshakeable, and without cracks and creases. Like that building, leaders with structural integrity are consistent, predictable, reliable, and act in accordance with their values. However, as has been suggested, integrity is not sufficient; singularly, it can produce leaders who are defined by rigidity, stubbornness, and an inability to receive feedback and input from others. Concerning character, integrity is not enough. Integrity, as a function of leadership character, is always in healthy tension with vulnerability.

Vulnerability, or the openness to attack or damage (Vulnerability, 2010), is the willingness to open oneself up to feedback, and even to feedback that may be difficult to hear. Vulnerability is a willingness to let one's guard down, to admit one's imperfections and to let other people know the real you. While this may sound trivial, the act of being vulnerable is not easy for most leaders. They are rewarded for strength and integrity, so the idea of letting people inside implies weakness. And, weakness is not a popular leadership characteristic. However, vulnerability, in the presence of integrity is not weaknesses. It is a virtue that must remain in constant tension with strong foundation of integrity.

The Fabric of Character

As we have suggested, character must be considered as a complex, yet undeniably practical and relevant, concept in the selection and development of our leaders. Like a fine quilt which is carefully and artfully sewn together by its maker, character includes individual elements similar to joining sections of material which, when sewn together, create an interdependent tapestry of who we are and what we will do. We have selected certain components of character in order to increase our understanding of the complexity, relevance, and interdependent nature of character virtues.

Certain virtues and their inherent tensions were selected because of their prevalence in the literature. Humility (Sarros & Barker; Leonard; Likona, 1991), courage (Barker & Coy, 2003; Hartman, 2006; Leonard, 1997; Sarros & Barker, 2003), and integrity (Barlow et al., 2003; Leonard, 1997; Sarros, Cooper, Hartican, 2006) have been discussed at length, and their counterparts (confidence, reluctance, and vulnerability, respectively) represent the intuitive tensions on the other side.

While several other virtues such as compassion, humor, passion, and wisdom (Barker and Coy, 2003) were considered, we have chosen to focus specifically on these three tensions. And, we see each of these factors represented in our current tensions in some way. For example, humility certainly includes some sense of humor, or more specifically, the ability to laugh at oneself. Instead of focusing on passion as an emotional state that may change and is separated from conviction, we focus on conviction as strength of thought, belief, and direction that is more stable in the character of a person. Lastly, although wisdom and discernment are vitally important, wisdom comes with experience, and may be difficult to assess in people who have not had the life experiences necessary to acquire wisdom.

What makes the three aforementioned tensions unique is that if the individual characteristics of courage, reluctance, humility, conviction, integrity and vulnerability are

considered on their own, they do not reflect good or evil, or right or wrong. They represent characteristics of a person that are desirable and that make persons who they are. We want both sides of these tensions present in the leaders we select. How much of each is preferable is another question. Too much reluctance without courage gives us a leader who will never take a risk. Too little conviction gives us a leader who may take responsibility for mistakes, but lacks a sense of who she is and what she stands for. How do you look for leaders who are aware of the need to find that balance in the tensions? When situations arise that call for conviction and humility in leaders, are they aware of those tensions of stepping back and stepping forward, taking a risk or being afraid, and when to remain resolute and firm in conviction or be open and vulnerable? These decisions are challenging, but represent the realities of leading well as a person of character.

Conclusion

It isn't enough to simply expect people to exhibit a set of character virtues and call it a day. When we're looking for character in people, we are looking for an awareness of the complexity of life, and the complexity of decision-making that impacts both the person making the decision and other people who have a stake in the final outcome. For that reason, the most important component or litmus test is the awareness of the tensions, and a willingness to express both sides in relationship to high stakes situations. While most of the tensions included here are attractive to most organizations and to leaders and followers alike, the most controversial are *vulnerability* and *reluctance*. Vulnerability is controversial because at its deepest levels, it implies an awareness of the person's vices, deepest mistakes, and need for confession of wrongs committed, often at the expense of other people involved. We don't encourage people to take responsibility at that level and rarely, if ever, know what to do with people when they admit their big mistakes and hidden sins. Reluctance is controversial for the same reason. When we interview leaders for high stakes jobs, we often miss the opportunity to create space for them to communicate a true reluctance because we interpret reluctance as wishy-washy, weakness, or as a lack of conviction. A leader who is reluctant can still have strong convictions, but is fully aware of all that is at stake for those he or she leads, or for others involved. Therefore, a leader who has calculated the costs of leading will be reluctant.

While interviewing and selecting leaders of the highest character, it is imperative to listen to interviewees' answers, tuning in to whether or not there is an awareness of the character tensions. You can search for this awareness by encouraging individuals to talk about high stakes situations that did not go well, that involved other people, and where there were great personal stakes for the person. The person can simply be asked to describe the situation, why it was so important, who else was involved, and what mistakes he or she made. While few people are sufficiently aware to communicate the tensions with perfect balance, high risk (low character) interviewees will communicate one side much more strongly than the other. We are suggesting that those with the character we desire are those who are aware and address this tension openly and honestly.

There is little doubt that character is the X factor we are looking for in leaders, yet our understanding of what we are looking for has been oversimplified. Few things in life are so difficult to define and so challenging to systematically identify as character in leaders. Yet, most of us would say we know it when we see it and we want it in our leaders. Thus, we are encouraging those searching for leaders with character, to be aware of their own limitations

and abilities, and to realize that character may, in fact, be harder to detect than previously thought.

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