

Character Based Leadership

As Susan Cain has well documented, our culture shifted at the turn of the last century away from a culture of character and toward a culture of personality. Gladly, many thought leaders today are advocating a reversal of that unfortunate shift. One example is the Lead Change Group, a nonprofit global community that is at the front of this cultural change toward culture-based leadership. I would concur with their assessment:

We need a leadership revolution so that character becomes the top priority in evaluating and developing leaders.

If character is going to be our first concern, it will prove helpful to better understand its nature. As I have written previously, I believe that character is comprised of two main ingredients.

Character, is often rightly connected to ethics, the practice of doing the right thing, the ethical thing. It then includes things we commonly attribute to it including: honesty, integrity, accountability, impartiality, courage and loyalty. In this sense, character is evidenced in our actions, the way we conduct ourselves in the reality of our everyday life. Living ethically means living without a significant gap between our aspirational values and our actual practice. Ethical leaders connect the dots. They are first and foremost known as people who do what is right rather than what is expedient or what is simply in their own interest. Instead of asking, "Is this possible?" we would do well to ask, "Is this the right thing to do."

As I have reflected on character, I have observed that there is an additional aspect that we normally connect to its presence or absence in an individual. People who

inappropriately fall apart emotionally, either through outbursts of anger or other unpleasant emotions poured out on others or through a propensity to quit and storm off of the playing field, are often said to have a character deficit. Grown adults with little emotional maturity look an awful lot like tantruming children. We intuitively connect emotional maturity and character all the time. I think this is accurate. People of character don't only do the right and ethical thing, they also conduct themselves in an emotionally mature manner practicing emotional intelligence skills including: self-awareness, emotional regulation, persistence, and empathy.

To instigate a revolution of character-based leadership, we must cultivate these two traits. Every aspiring or current leader would do well to focus afresh on the development of increased emotional intelligence and a robust practice of ethics. If I'm correct and character equals the composite of these two traits, the pathway toward increased character and influence becomes clear. Character is being the emotionally mature leader that others can follow as they learn by experience that we are ethical at the core of who we are. Want to join the character revolution? The path is clear. It only remains for us to walk it.