

CHARACTER COUNTS

Why being true to yourself is so important

“Leadership

is much less about what you do and much more about who you are,” writes Jim Collins, in a foreword to the book, “Hesselbein on Leadership,” by Frances Hesselbein.

Seth Godin offers a different perspective:

“Authenticity, for me, is doing what you promise, not being who you are,” Godin says. “That’s because ‘being’ is too amorphous and we are notoriously bad at judging that.”

We take the view that being and doing are inextricably intertwined, and we should not fall into the trap of emphasizing one over the other. Our behavior is influenced by who we are, and it also reinforces innate qualities. The habits that flow out of who we are also build neural pathways that are difficult to reroute. That is one of the reasons that as we choose leaders, we must be diligent in ensuring that they have a track record of both accomplishment and character.

Most business leaders are much more comfortable discussing the domain of “doing” that is “the ability and proven track record to accomplish what the role requires.” Some may even suggest that if you can’t measure a construct, it’s not important. And we would all acknowledge that “being,” or character, is hard to measure.

Yet, we ignore

it at our own peril. Unconvinced? Try the following thought experiment: Bernie Madoff has just been approved for a work-release program. How would your board react if you proposed that you hire him as your new CFO or CIO? Character suddenly becomes very important. We may not be able to measure it, but we know good character when we see it. While you or your board members may admire Madoff’s ingenuity and confidence, his deceit would kill any chance he would have at being on your team. His character doesn’t meet the “sniff” test. He can’t be trusted. Honesty is a character trait one wants in all employees.

So what are some of the character qualities of an effective leader? Jim Collins suggests that a “Level Five leader” is one who demonstrates humility and a persistent will: “modest and willful, humble and fearless.”

This suggests three initial considerations for choosing leaders: humility, persistence and courage. While these three qualities are not a comprehensive list, they do seem to suggest a starting point that is hard to dispute.

While humility may seem out of place to some, it does not require common connotations of undue deference or weak-willed behavior. Leaders demonstrating humility don’t let their egos get in the way of organizational success. Organizational success and reputation come first for great leaders. It doesn’t take long to think of leaders who put themselves above the

organization and have been rendered ineffective because of it.

Persistence is essential to go through or around barriers that are a daily reality for leaders. The ability to set organizational and personal goals and work diligently to attain them is key for your leaders. While some would suggest this belongs in the “doing” domain, it is clear that some people have internal motivation to achieve that is higher than others. It is an element of “being” that is reflected in “doing.”

Leadership involves risks. Courage doesn’t deny the risks of leading an organization into the unknown. It simply allows leaders to take leaps that others might not make. Progress requires risk. Leaders have the courage to make decisions that propel an organization forward.

There is another important reason that these qualities are important for leaders. Each is important in leading a sustainable organization that has a clear identity. As Stephen Covey notes, every organization needs to “have a center. You need to have identified values. You need to know what you stand for and you need to stand for it so that others know, too.”

Standing firm for what your organization stands for requires the ability to put the organization before your own personal ambition, the will to persist when it’s hard to live what you stand for and the courage to make hard calls when you and others aren’t living up to your own standards. <<



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