

The Fickle Nature of Good Character and Trust

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“HIRE FOR CHARACTER, TRAIN FOR COMPETENCE,” I have said it a thousand times. However, I have come to realize that people think very differently about a person’s good character, from how they define good character to how they determine a person is not of good character. As I write this, the Canadian government is invoking the Emergencies Act to deal with people protesting Covid vaccine mandates. Last month the USA recognized one year since the January 6th, 2021, insurrection over the election. Many people of good character sit on both sides of these issues. If their choices are wrong, are they doomed to be never trusted again? To never achieve the label of “person of good character?” I hope not. Below are a series of commonly asked questions I receive when teaching our Values-Based Decision Making course where I discuss good character. Please join me as I walk through these thought provoking questions:



1. What is character and how do we define it?
2. If you have good character, how long does it take to lose it and how do you keep from losing it?
3. If you lose it, will people ever trust you again? Can you get it back?
4. If you don’t have good character, how long does it take to gain it?
5. How do we test for good character in an interview in such a way that the answer can’t be faked?
6. Is it possible to help our people develop good character or do we simply accept that if they don’t have good character by adulthood, they never will?

I have been in the full-time work force for over 45 years and have come to realize that we are “human beings, not perfect beings.” We are all prone to make mistakes or bad decisions, especially when we are under pressure. We are prone to make bad, and

sometimes unethical, judgements when there is greater pressure to “get’er done,” versus to get things done ethically, safely, or legally. I have seen the status of being “a person of good character” wiped away in a split second with a bad decision, resulting in years of penance before the good-character status is achieved again and sometimes it never is. In 25 years of consulting, I have asked over fifteen thousand people the following question: In the workplace, do you receive more pressure to get things done no matter what it takes, or to get things done correctly (ethically, safely, legally)? In other words,



do your supervisors demonstrate that they care more about your results, or about your results delivered through good character-based decisions? Overwhelmingly, people identified that they received more pressure to focus on results versus on results achieved using good character-based decisions. It is why so many employees describe their company’s values on

the wall as “pious words of intent.” I come from an industry that espouses the importance of safety, but also has a commonly used saying: “get’er done.” That saying has led to more employee deaths and injury than I care to imagine. I know this because I led the investigation on some of them.

So, let’s take a crack at answering the above questions and see if we can draw some conclusions about good character.

1. What is good character and how do we define it?

The great basketball coach John Wooden once said, "The true test of a man's character is what he does when no one is watching." With all respect to coach Wooden, the trouble with this standard is: if no one is looking, how do we know? I tend to follow the



character standard of the great ethicist Michael Josephson who said, "The real test of character is if you are willing to do the right thing even though it may cost you more than you want to pay." Doing the right thing can be seen as too broad. However, the decisions we make as leaders, executives and people in general, are often complex and don't fit in a right-versus-wrong box. It's what makes being human so

challenging sometimes. Doing the right thing often involves executing on such core values as integrity, loyalty, honesty, courage and fortitude. Some people would call these virtues and they are. However, I refer to them as moral values. As the great ethicist Dr. Larry Axline said, "Moral values in action is ethics." I have discovered throughout my career that one's character is rarely tested by making the right choice but more by what you do when someone points out that you've made the wrong choice and everyone is watching. Arguably, I correlate being trustworthy to good character. I believe people pin the label of "good character" on a person they trust and the label of "questionable character" on someone they do not trust or who they no longer trust.

2. If you have good character, how long does it take to lose it and how do you keep from losing it?

If you have good character, people will give you what I call character-based trust. They will trust your word. If you say you will do something, they don't have a second thought about you doing it because they know and accept it will be done. That trust can be lost slowly over time or in a split second. I have witnessed, time and time again, people demonstrating what I call "stepping to the left" by using a myriad of rationalizations such as "no one will ever know" or "just this once" or "it's only a little white lie." I have seen this cause people to slowly lose the trust of others to the point where no one trusts

the individual at all. I have seen leaders slowly erode their team's trust by regularly showing up to their own meetings late with lame excuses. It's as if you start a relationship with a pocket full of trust credits given by people who trust you (see my cynicism comments in section #4 below for those who don't) and every time you rationalize a bad decision you lose a trust credit with others, until you reach the point



where all the credits are gone.

However, I have also seen someone lose all their trust credits at once. Something done or said due to substance abuse, succumbing to a bribe or fraud when finances are tight, or erupting under pressure and tearing down another human being can all lead to a complete loss of trust credits.

As human beings, not perfect beings, I think we are all bound to lose some, or all, of the trust credits given to us by others at some point in our relationships. But there are things you can do to hold yourself in check, such as:

1. **Set Your Compass:** Define and publish your personal core values for all to see, then commit to letting them guide your behavior and decisions, no matter what.
2. **Set Your Boundaries:** Ask someone (or a group) to be your truth-teller and always hold you accountable to your values and point out when they believe you have contravened one or more of your values. This usually takes a special person who sees you regularly in your element and has the courage to call you out. Of note, my oldest daughter, from a very young age, had no trouble pointing out when I strayed from my values.
3. **Engage Your Leadership:** When held to account by your truth-teller on your values, you need to be willing to thank them for their courage, explain your reasoning or admit any mistakes, apologize to those affected and, if wrong, change or correct your decision.



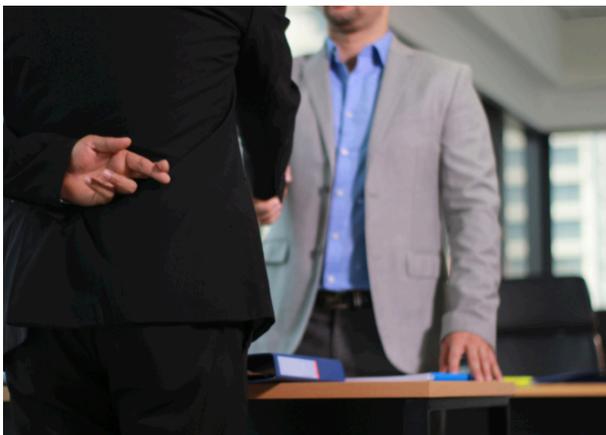
I still find it amazing how many senior leaders consider themselves perfect beings and are unwilling to admit they are wrong, for fear that others will lose confidence in them. The fact is, the opposite is true. When leaders admit mistakes (I mean, everyone knows you've made a mistake already), they garner greater trust from others. Mind you, it the leader is constantly making mistakes, one may also need to consider leader

competence, but I will save that discussion for another article. I have found that people don't expect leaders to be perfect. They are expected to be honest, willing to admit when they are wrong and correct the issue.

It may be important to stop and discuss two other types of trust not covered in this paper. Competency-based trust is when others trust that you have the skill to do the work. Often companies have hired based on competence alone only to discover the individual's character is wanting. Without some sort of development intervention, this can be a bad hire. Vulnerability-based trust, a term coined by Patrick Lencioni, is based upon the humble vulnerability one demonstrates with others on a team when one leaves everything on the table, warts and all. When achieved, it is often what catapults teams from merely competent to high performing teams and advanced organizational culture.

3 If you lose it, will people ever trust you again? Can you get it back?

When others pin the "lacks good character" button on you and have lost trust in you, they can be fickle in giving trust back and allowing you to regain your good-character status. I watched a colleague make a bad choice which was influenced by alcohol abuse.



He ended up being demoted and losing the trust of his entire team and his boss, the CEO. I watched him go on the wagon, get sober, and pay his penance. It took five years for his boss and colleagues to truly demonstrate their trust in him. In my opinion, this trust could have been established more quickly. People can trust you again; however, it takes a high degree of humility and transparency. You need to

discover, by asking them, what they need from you to regain their trust and then you need to execute on their answer. You need to give them time. I use a Marshal Goldsmith Stakeholder Coaching process that asks for feedback and feed forward on behaviour(s) monthly. Performance change and trust can be measured using a quick mini survey. If a leader I am coaching had lost the trust of their team, we would ask the team what it would take to earn their trust again, set an aligned behaviour goal to achieve that, then

ask affected stakeholders to provide feedback on the behaviour monthly by identifying what worked, what did not, and what the leader needs to do in the next 30 days. This process would occur in 30-day intervals over a 9-12 month period with interim mini-surveys focused on the behaviour and completed by the stakeholders. The survey measures improvement. My colleague referenced above didn't ask others what was needed and didn't ask for regular feedback. He put his own plan in place. I'm assuming that is why it took so long.

I was asked to do a presentation to an executive leadership team on values-based leadership. This was a team that had published values (the posters were everywhere) and professed to be a "values-based company." Early in the presentation, I asked the executives if I could test how values-based they were. I had taken the liberty of taking

down the values poster in the room before my presentation. I asked each executive to pull out a piece of paper and write down their company's core values in order without reference to any other document, poster, etc. Out of seven people, the only person who wrote anything down was the CEO. He got



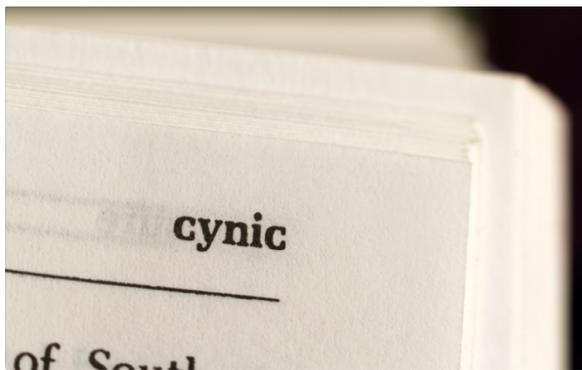
the first value correct and then nothing after that. My comment to them was, "If you profess to be values-led, that means you know what the values are and use them in your dialogue daily. If you are the leader who had the values poster put up and you don't know the values, I will guarantee that your teams think your values are pious words of intent and think you are untrustworthy." My message was not well received. One VP told me I was full of s@#t. My response was "maybe" and I challenged him to go find the answer. That same VP phoned me three days later and told me he tested my theory. He went to his three-person team, two of whom had worked for him for 12+ years and followed him to this company. He told me he asked them in their Monday team meeting if they trusted him. He said he got two no's and one weak yes. He then asked them why they didn't trust him. They said, "We like you, you are a nice guy, but you are always shooting off in different directions, not keeping us informed or telling us what you are doing and why". They said, "It's like you totally disregard our core value of people." I told the executive about the Marshal Goldsmith coaching method, asked him what trusted behavior would look like and suggested he ask his team and set a goal. Nine

months later, he phoned me and said he now has three strong yeses to the question “Do you trust me?”

When you’ve lost trust and people believe your character is left wanting, they can trust you again: it just takes humility and involving them as stakeholders in the process of regaining their trust. It takes time.

4 If you don’t have good character, how long does it take to gain it?

There are two parts to this answer. One part reflects your behavior, and the other reflects the level of cynicism of the person who is issuing you trust credits. Cynics tend to doubt that people do anything from a position of character, but rather that people



are motivated solely by self-interest. Their cynicism is often a reflection of their experience. A cynic, for example may not believe that a leader cares about the success of their team members, but only feigns caring so the leader themselves can succeed. We need to be careful not to judge a cynic too harshly. A participant in our Values-

Based Decision-Making course completed a Cynicism Quotient Assessment which revealed he had a high level of cynicism. He informed his team that, in his previous employment, he was a midlevel manager for Enron and lost his pension due to their fraudulent misdeeds. Telling him he shouldn’t be so cynical would do no good. We had to prove ourselves trustworthy to permit him to let go of his cynicism in a timely manner. To be a person of good character requires acting consistently with integrity, being truthful, loyal, honest, fair and forthright, having courage and being kind. People look for these traits to identify good character. People of good character admit mistakes, correct them, and move on. When people witness this, they tend to think of you as trustworthy and a person of good character. However, everyone comes with their own baggage. I always tell the leaders I am coaching that they must demonstrate trustworthiness consistently before people will trust them. Some people will take longer than others to deem them trustworthy and of good character and issue them the full load of trust credits. Some associates have been abused by previous leaders and will take time to trust again. This is true for many of our relationships, not just the working

ones. Just because you are acting trustworthy with good character, doesn't mean you will be trusted and deemed of good character by others right away. Be patient. There are those who may never issue trust credits and will carry their cynicism to the grave. I coach leaders to allow such cynicism to be an accountability yard stick for a period. However, if it stays too long without reason based on your relationship with them, it becomes a poison that must be removed from the relationship and/or organization.

5. How do we test for good character in an interview in such a way that the answer can't be faked?

Is there a high enough percentage of "people of good character" in the population that it is even worthwhile testing for in an interview? I have read that putting your grocery cart back in the corral is a test of character. My experience would say that eliminates about 35% of the population. I have heard that sticking to your commitments is a sign of good character. Statistically, that eliminates about 52% of people in first-time domestic partnerships. However, this doesn't mean we should only look for employees who are single and don't go shopping.

When interviewing new employees for a software company I cofounded, we would ask the candidates to bring their personal core values

to the second interview. If they did not have defined personal core values, we had them go to the free website www.EthicsTool.com and use the core values tool to aid them in creating, defining, and prioritizing their core values. We would then ask a series of behaviour-based questions around



the candidate's core values: asking them to illustrate how the values impacted various decisions they had made or how the values would help them solve a case study we presented them with. We also asked them to tell us how our published corporate values aligned (or not) with their personal values. We asked them to describe what it would look like when their personal core values came alive in our organization. With these "values deep-dives," we always caught those who were just giving us good-character lip service.

6. Is it possible to help our people develop good character or do we simply accept that if they don't have good character by adulthood, they never will?

Early in my career, I was fortunate enough to meet a man who modelled good character on a regular basis. It was then I realized that good character was a trait I generally lacked but wanted to pursue. It has been a life journey ever since.

I think we need to give ourselves and our colleagues a break. I think the status of good character is a journey we undertake and then oscillate between achieving and not



achieving. Please don't get me wrong, however; when we demonstrate something less than good character, there need to be consequences.

Sometimes those consequences will be fair and uncomfortable, and sometimes they will be fair and catastrophic. When consulting to executive teams on team chartering, I coach them to consider the termination of a team member who violates team confidentiality. If the team member stays, the organization may not be able to afford the consequences of that person not having team trust while they are trying to recover it. Lack of trust amongst the executive team has a compounding negative ripple effect on the organization.

Over the years, I have come to accept that when accountability is doled out, there will be times the relationship severs. However, there are also times when we need to allow a person to reclaim good-character status with their actions and earn our trust credits back, rather than block them from ever achieving our trust again. Time and time again I have seen professional organizations place unbearable pressure on individuals to achieve financial/performance results while giving lip service to values and ethics, then display shock when the individual cuts corners to achieve the results. It is why we need to consider one's intentions when we consider accountability. I tell my customers that malicious intent needs to be dealt with harshly; however, sometimes people have good intent (i.e., to help the organization succeed), but execute by doing the wrong thing. This type of misstep needs to be handled with compassion.

I have been running a survey for the past four months with two questions on it:

1. Have you ever witnessed someone make an ethically questionable decision?
 - a. Yes – 88%
 - b. No – 12%
2. Have you ever made an ethically questionable decision?
 - a. Yes – 87%
 - b. No – 13%

If these statistics represent the general population and if the standard of “once they’ve lost my trust, they will never regain it” is the benchmark or if regaining trust takes five years, then the likelihood of ever achieving high-trust teams, relationships or organizational culture is sadly out of reach.

I think we make too many assumptions about what people know and don’t know about good character: about acting with integrity, being truthful, loyal, honest, fair, and forthright, having courage and being kind. Sometimes people have not been taught



this or had a chance to see this modeled in others. Sometimes the opposite modeling has been their experience. We need to help people explore their character and determine who they want to be through defining their personal values, and set up personal systems of accountability and trust. For some, any adjustments might be minimal; for

others, they will be life changing. Early in my career, I took such training from that very person who modelled good character for me and eventually became a mentor. For me it was life changing. So much so that I developed and offer a course called Values-Based Decision Making (VBDM). The course walks leaders through a deep dive into not only their personal character but also, if applicable, the character of their organizational culture and allows them to measure the discrepancy between desired versus actual character. Taking such training was life changing for me and the thousands of others around the world who have taken Values-Based Decision Making training. I have a drawer full of emails that attest to this. People of literally every gender, race, and heritage can, with this training, envision the person they want to be versus the person they have become. We have witnessed individual and organizational character grow and flourish, leading to amazing relationships and success. Relationships based upon being

human beings, not perfect beings. In other words, people of good character are still going to screw up at times in their lives. They will lose and gain trust credits. They simply need to keep a clear vision on their values compass and surround themselves with people who will hold them accountable. Our Values-Based Decision Making course helps individuals and organizations do just that.

I want to hire and be surrounded by people of good character, as I'm sure many of you do as well. It is possible but needs to be viewed through an understanding that good character, and the trust that goes with it, is more a journey than a destination.

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