Leaders of Tomorrow, Ethical or Not?

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Summary

A recently published [survey] [1] by the Josephson Institute raises some pretty shocking indicators of our future leaders. The institute surveyed 29,670 randomly selected high school students in the United States. Almost all of those surveyed thought it was important to be an honest and trustworthy person (98%). However, when we look at demonstrated character, 64% said they cheated on a test, 30% said they stole something from a store, and 23% said they had stolen something from a parent or relative. Even 1 out of 4 respondents (26%) said they didn't complete the anonymous survey honestly. We are going to have a real crisis of character in our businesses that can lead to significant business failure if we don't focus on this issue, so what can we do?

- In a recently published survey of US high school students, 64% have cheated on a test and 93% are satisfied with their own ethics and character
- Strong character leads to strong teams which leads to personal and professional success
- What can be done to build stronger organizational character?
    - Hold people accountable to the organization's value system
    - Hire people that fit into the culture
    - Offer training to help people articulate and develop their character, e.g. personal management courses
    - Provide assignments that challenge the individual in context of their skills and their character and provide feedback on both fronts
    - Remove people from the organization that fail on the character front even if they're great on the results front (because it won't last)

Leaders of Tomorrow, Ethical or Not?

In the December 8th, 2008 Information Week issue, Rob Preston wrote an [article] [2] questioning if we value character in our professionals. He quoted a [survey] [1] by the Josephson Institute that raises some pretty shocking indicators of our future leaders. The institute surveyed 29,670 randomly selected high school students in the United States. Almost all of those surveyed thought it was important to be an honest and trustworthy person, 99% of females, and 97% of males. However, when we look at demonstrated character, 64% said they cheated on a test, 30% said they stole something from a store, and 23% said they had stolen something from a parent or relative. Even 1 out of 4 respondents (26%) said they didn't complete the anonymous survey honestly.

If we leave these trends unchecked, we're going to have a rough time driving excellence in our businesses. How many teams do we think will be successful if the team members are not trustworthy? It's important to create and drive programs that not only help people master new skills, but also to create accountability and strength of character. My experience in the working environment for the last 20+ years is that we have many opportunities to enhance our skills, e.g. if you're a software developer, there are literally thousands of classes focused on mastering new applications or building better software. And there are a few training opportunities to help us with our character, e.g. anti-harrassment or ethics courses. But those tend to focus on policies and rules, i.e. don't break these rules or you're in trouble, versus training and opportunities for developing honest relationships, or challenging us so that we are better people when we accomplish or reach a goal. So what are some of the things we should do more of to build our collective character?

Consistent Organizational Value System

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Make sure your organizations' vision, mission and values are clear and that everyone is incented to act and execute in harmony with that direction. This means that the senior leaders should not only talk about the value system but also should demonstrate it through their everyday actions. The organization should have a way of holding the leaders accountable to that directed character statement, e.g. using 360 degree feedback as part of the senior leaders compensation and reward system that includes acting in accordance to the businesses vision, mission and values. Once this system is working well, it should be deployed to every level of the organization, holding people accountable for acting in accordance to what the business has deemed important for it's future success.

Hiring Practices

The hiring process is the gateway that all employees pass before they are invited to be part of the team, therefore consideration for character should be evaluated as much as a person bringing the right skills and capabilities. All of us have probably been asked to check a candidate for 'cultural fit' during our interviews. This is a good start, but I'm talking about a bit more rigor. For example, each interviewer could take a company value and test the interviewee on that value. Use of a case study that challenges that behavioral norm would be very useful and then rating their performance and combining that with the skill and capability rating would give a more complete picture. Some organizations use psychological testing, as draconian as that might be in context of our current feel good culture, I wouldn't discount it. Remember the people you hire become the representatives of your business to your customers, suppliers and stakeholders.

Character Training

I have found that focusing on personal management courses drive people to reconsider why they do things and can have profound effects on people re-evaluating their value system. This is precisely the kind of thought you want to promote. In some cases, people will self-select out of your organization because they don't feel they're being consistent with their value system by continuing to work there. This is not a bad thing. The happier people feel in their organizations, the more committed and productive they will be. The reverse is also true, if they're not happy, you will be investing a lot effort and energy in folks that would be better invested elsewhere. Ceptara has a [workshop] [3] that focuses on personal management, and others I would recommend include the Franklin Covey courses such as Seven Habits workshop.

I also noticed while researching this article, on the Josephson Institute [website] [4] they have what they call Character Development Seminars. I don't have first hand experience with them, but it may be worth investigating.

Challenging Assignments

Values need to be reinforced until we internalize them as habits and act consistently in accordance to the value. Anyone who has had children can most likely come up with one or two examples that exemplify that fact. This is also true in a professional environment. We should develop our people, all of our people (that's another topic), by creating assignments that stretch an individuals' capabilities and character. We should give them enough space to prove to themselves and eventually to us that they have mastered the new situation and delivered results, and then we should reward or correct them as appropriate. I believe most businesses do a pretty good job on the reward side, and a fairly good job on correcting for results or skills failures, however, when it comes to challenging our character, most people have difficulty with that. It's important to hold people accountable for character issues, e.g. honesty, empathy, courage, etc., as it is to holding them accountable to the results. Businesses can foster that behavior by incorporating the "softer skills" expectations into their performance objectives and project expectations.

Conclusion

Do the Ends really justify the Means? I don't think so, and if you agree you'll want to contemplate and invest in some of the areas we've talked about. I know it sounds like a lot of work - but recall the survey results, you're going to be hiring some of those folks that fell into the not so trustworthy category, so

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don't let this become a crisis for your business if there are ways of proactively managing for it upfront.

What do you think?

- Quality Excellence [5]

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