

Leadership Character: A Matter of Trust
Richard Parrott*

Leadership is the process of influencing others to reach a common goal. Influence is the *sine qua non* of leadership. Without influence, leadership does not exist. Leaders develop a pattern of behavior used to influence others. This pattern includes the way a leader responds and relates to others in order to influence them toward the accomplishment of the groups goals.

Character is the *"aggregate of qualities that distinguish one person from another"* (American Heritage Dictionary). If you speak of a person as displaying "strange character," you mean they exhibit a pattern of behavior that distinguishes them from their normal pattern. If the pattern is consistently different, you may refer to them as "quite a character." If you break your normal pattern of relating and responding, you may say, "I was out of character."

When you speak of a person as having "moral character," they exhibit a pattern or quality of behavior that distinguishes them from an immoral person. Much leadership talk on character is aimed at "moral character." Moral character makes you a good person. However, it takes more than being a good person to provide good leadership.

A person of "leadership character" has a quality or pattern of behavior that distinguishes them from people who are not leaders. Leaders display patterns of relating and responding that influence the actions of others. Leadership character is the habit or pattern of behavior that provides good leadership.

If you habitually say one thing and follow through on it, if you habitually stand up for the greater good of the organization, if you habitually reconsider a decision when the situation has changed, if you habitually learn from others, then you are providing a pattern of good leadership – you display leadership character.

However, if you habitually say one thing but do another, if you habitually back down under pressure, if you habitually push ahead with your original plans even when the situation has changed, if you habitually refuse to learn from others, then you are providing a pattern of poor leadership – you lack leadership character.

* Richard Parrott (Ph.D., Oregon State University), is Executive Director of the Sandberg Leadership Center and of the Doctor of Ministry Program at ATS.

- * What is the pattern of behaving and relating that provides good leadership?
- * What is the spiritual foundation of good leadership character?
- * How is good leadership character developed?

These are the questions discussed at a Roundtable Convocation held at The Sandberg Leadership Center on the campus of Ashland Theological Seminary, October 25-27, 2001. There were 25 participants representing business, government, nonprofit organizations, academics, and the church. Four keynote speakers set the direction for the discussion. A brief excerpt from each address is presented in this article.

Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

President of Saint Paul School of Theology
in Kansas City, Missouri.

A leader who consistently demonstrates quality of character is reciprocated with followers who place trust in their leader. Trust is "*firm reliance on the integrity or ability of a person*" (American Heritage Dictionary). Lovett Weems reflects the significance of trust in the leader in this personal story.

Seminary presidents spend much time raising money. Years ago I heard the statistic that large gifts tend to come after a dozen or so visits, often by the president. I was close to that statistical average with a woman in her nineties. She had ample resources, no family, close ties to the church, interest in our school, yet had never given a single gift. I scheduled yet another visit with her by scheduling a flight with a lengthy layover in her city so I could take her to dinner, as was our usual pattern.

When I arrived at her home, she was not dressed to go out. She indicated that she was not feeling well and perhaps we could visit for a few minutes and then I could head back to the airport. We talked briefly in her living room. Then, as we were standing at the door as I was leaving, she said simply, "I trust you." I knew then that we would receive a major gift. She left half of her estate to the seminary for student scholarships.

That was the day I learned that the term “development” was no mere euphemism for “fund raising.” It became abundantly clear to me that people give out of trust and that trust grows out of relationships and experience that engender such trust.

The level of trust that exists within an organization and toward leaders is crucial to the effectiveness of leadership. When trust is limited, it is difficult for progress to take place. Conversely, in places where a high level of trust has been developed, remarkable change can be accomplished with a minimum of acrimony and delay.

A leader’s trust is won very slowly, but it can be lost quickly. Once lost, this trust is very difficult to regain in that leadership setting. People may give us a leadership position through election or employment. However, the credibility needed to lead must be worked out among the people with whom we serve. It is trust from those with whom the leader works most closely that gives a leader the essential element of credibility.

Valerie K. Brown, CPA

Executive Director and founder of the Church Financial Management and Leadership Institute, Assistant Professor of Management at the Samuel D. Proctor School of Theology.

Leaders need support structures that protect and validate the trust placed upon them. Valerie Brown shared a wonderful, biblical illustration focusing on financial trust. Read the story and consider the question, “How can a leader build systems and structures that protect and validate trust such as ‘being honest’ and ‘keeping promises’?”

Trust is lifted up as the paramount character trait for leaders in the church, yet we find violations of trust every day. The Bible teaches us that we are our brothers’ keepers. We find in the Word of God in the book of Ezra an example of how the church can become the “brothers’ keeper” of the

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financial officers by instituting checks and balances. In Ezra 8:24-26 we find these words:

“I appointed twelve leaders of the priests...to be in charge of transporting the silver, the gold, the gold bowls, and the other items that the king, his council, his leaders, and the people had presented for the temple of God. I weighted the treasure as I gave it to them and found the totals to be...”

This passage was written during the rebuilding of the Temple. People and leaders gave money to the priests for the rebuilding of the Temple. The people surely “trusted” the priest and other workers in the Temple, yet they still counted what was given to the priest prior to giving it to them. The priests were required to transport all that was given back to Jerusalem. Later, after the journey to Jerusalem, we find in Ezra 8:33:

“On the 4th day after our arrival the silver, gold, and other valuables were weighed at the Temple...everything was accounted for by number and weight and was officially recorded.”

The priests were held ‘accountable’ and there were checks and balances put in place to ensure that the priests were not even tempted to misappropriate or steal any items entrusted in their care.

It is wise for a leader to build personal systems of accountability rather than wait for followers to rise up and demand such a structure. What is your personal accountability system for maintaining your trustworthiness?

Bill Perkins

Founder and president of the Million Mighty Men, author of *Awaken the Leader Within* and was one of three contributors to the *Leadership Bible*.

Integrity is the character quality of a leader that, over time, fosters genuine trust in leaders. Bill Perkins describes integrity and shares a story of testing.

Integrity is the foundation upon which the character of a leader will stand or fall. Whether you're leading a company, a church, a family, a battalion or an athletic team—those you lead want to know they can trust you.

The word *integrity* speaks of someone who is “whole or complete” and has the same root word as does the word *integrated*. A leader of integrity has taken the principals that govern his life, internalized them, and integrated them into every area of his life. A leader of integrity isn't like a weathervane that changes direction with every shift of the social winds. He's like a compass that is internally magnetized so it always points north regardless of what's happening around it. He is honest at work *and* at home. He keeps promises *even* if it means a financial loss. He speaks well of his clients in their presence *and* behind their back. He doesn't treat his wife with respect in public and belittle her behind closed doors. A leader of integrity doesn't switch masks to win the favor of the audience he's playing for.

Because leaders of integrity don't pretend to be something they're not, with them, what you see is what you get, literally. And it's not that leaders of integrity are perfect—they aren't. But they're aware of their weaknesses and don't lead others to believe they have no personal flaws. When my friend admitted he cared for people but had a hot temper, his statement demonstrated integrity.

It's a fact of life that you never know when your integrity will be tested. That's a lesson learned by an ambitious nurse who was being considered to lead the nursing team at a prestigious hospital. The chief of surgery had just completed

an operation in which she was assisting when he snapped off his surgical gloves and told her to close the incision. “But doctor, you’ve only removed eleven sponges. We used twelve.” “I removed them all,” the doctor declared. “Now close the incision.” “No!” the nurse objected. “We used twelve sponges and there are only eleven on the table.” “I’ll take full responsibility,” the surgeon said sternly. “Suture.” “You can’t do that,” the nurse insisted. “What about the patient?” The surgeon smiled, lifted his foot, and showed the nurse the twelfth sponge, which he had hidden under his shoe. Smiling, he said, “You’ll do. The nursing team is yours to lead.”

The nurse passed the integrity test. She held to the highest standard of patient care and put it into practice—even when a promotion was at stake.

Everyday you’ll face similar tests. They’ll be unannounced. Some will be subtle and others will be in your face. Whether you know it or not those you lead will be watching you. They’ll observe how you handle those unexpected character tests. As you allow the wisdom of Jesus to awaken the leader within you, your integrity will grow. As it does, those you lead will trust you more. As their trust grows so will their eagerness to follow you.

Paul Blease

Director of Advanced Training at
Salomon Smith Barney in New York.

A loss of integrity comes from an inward “disconnect” as described by Paul Blease as he shares the story of the kind of conversations he has with some of the highest producers in the world of finance.

If you have ever been around extraordinary achievers, there is an edge, volatility, intensity, sometimes it comes out as intensity, sometimes as volatility. When it gets pathological, I get involved. I have found that all of our top producers have a high level of confidence. Confidence is based on the task: I can do it! When you feel confident, you feel

confident about your capacity to do something. It is a task orientation. However, there is another element that comes into play: Self-esteem. Self-esteem asks, "Am I worthy?" I have found that if there is a disconnect between confidence and self-esteem, volatility will emerge.

I work with people that have confidence bordering on arrogance coupled with low self-esteem. They can do the job, but they lack a sense of worthiness. This comes out in one-on-one conversations. It almost always stems from how they were raised. They are trying to prove someone wrong; oftentimes, fathers, sometimes other people.

One individual invited me to his home after a day of working with his management team. He indicated he had some individual issues that "I need to talk to you about". In the 5-hour conversation that followed, the disconnect between confidence in the job and personal work in the soul emerged. On one hand, there was this businessperson that was Machiavellian on the other side was this born-again Christian who had a wonderful family, wonderful church life and all the great stuff in life. This was a disconnect from his childhood, where he learned the classic, "I'll show you" type of behavior in response to a very autocratic, demanding father where nothing was ever good enough."

Everything in this man's life was designed to win favor, and, in our culture, you win favor through tangible accomplishments. This drives your confidence level very high but does nothing for your self-esteem. Self-esteem is, "Am I worthy in spite of...and without an reference to my performance." Brought up to be measured on his performance, he said that he had always been afraid that if he let down his guard, he would loose his edge and would cease to perform to his current level. He said, "This is what drives me."

I asked him if he understood that that is not what drives him. What drives him is how he is wired, "You are a type 'A' personality. You will achieve at this point, based on habit, based on who you have become. Why you achieve will

change if you bring this person that you are at home and in church into your business life. You'll still achieve, but the reason for the accomplishment will change. Rather than to prove your dad and everybody else wrong, it will be to fulfill and fuse who you are with what you do. Your mission will change. The 'why' will change. Your sense of fulfillment will dramatically improve. Your stress level will dramatically decrease. You live in a constant state of stress. Every time you fail to achieve marginally, your self-esteem is again hammered. It is a no-win scenario."

What you see in the volatility issue is a lack of maturity. A person will stop growing, emotionally, at some point in childhood. As an adult you put a façade over the child. You dress for success and you are more articulate. You have possessions. You look like an adult. But you are really a child saying, "I hope no one figures this thing out."

One of the problems is that when you have a high level of confidence, bordering on arrogance, people figure you can take it. They come at you head on. Then, you blow up. No one sees that low self-esteem beneath the façade unless they really know the person and they really love them.

The question I always get from people is, "How do I create high self esteem?" I cannot use the word "Christ" in a business setting so I use, "it's a spiritual element." It is a "spiritual connection." But, in this setting I have an audience that I can speak plain—it is called "grace." "Grace" says, "I love you, period!" That is the conversation I have with some of our largest producers in the Salomon Smith Barney organization.

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The task of leadership has not changed. Leaders move/influence people to work together toward the accomplishment of mission. What has changed is the situation of leadership. The leaders power to move/influence others no longer rests primarily in a position of having, but in a relationship of trust. Let me summarize the lessons:

* The purpose of good leadership character is to engender trusting relationships so that leaders and followers can work together in healthy ways to accomplish the mission of the organization.

* Leaders must take responsibility to develop systems, structures and supports that protect and verify the trust that is placed upon them.

* The character pattern of integrity—speak the truth, keep your promise, and be authentic—will, over time and consistency, foster genuine trusting relationships.

* Integrity is born out of an awareness of our own inward disconnects (brokenness) and the embrace of the grace of Christ that reconnects (heals) us as whole persons.

If you want to learn how to get people to trust you, begin by learning how you can trust God.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV)

This article is based on excerpts from the new publication “Leadership Character”. This book contains the writings and reflections of the 25 participants of a Round Table Convocation on leadership character held October 25-27, 2001 at The Sandberg Leadership Center, Ashland Theological Seminary, 910 Center Street, Ashland OH 44805. Copies of the book may be purchased for \$10 from The Sandberg Leadership Center. Email leadon@ashland.edu.