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The Good Ones

Ten Crucial Qualities of High-Character Employees

Bruce Weinstein • New World Library © 2015 • 280 pages

Human Resources / Recruitment
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Take-Aways

- Employees with strong character are honest and truthful.
- They hold themselves responsible for their actions.
- They demonstrate care for their co-workers.
- They speak their minds with courage and stand up for what they believe.
- They operate fairly, including how they hire and promote.
- They are grateful, feel good about their circumstances and make others feel good, too.
- They exhibit humility and know that they depend on their colleagues to do well.
- They are loyal to their employers.
- They focus on the work at hand without getting distracted.
- They are patient, persistent, flexible and willing to wait for long-term gratification.

Recommendation

The accountant you hire to do your books may be a genius and a top grad from a renowned business school. But these attributes will hold little value if your star hire also swindles, cheats and lies. Your firm's new salesperson may be able to charm and close prospects on the first call. But your colleagues will quickly tire of their new co-worker if he or she constantly demeans, belittles and berates everyone else in the office. Character counts for more than you realize. You can hire the most impressive, skillful, intelligent people, but if they lack character, you're inviting trouble, extra expense and turnover. Bruce Weinstein, who uses the tag "The Ethics Guy," discusses why character is so crucial in business. He lists the 10 key traits that distinguish "high-character employees" and teaches you how to spot character in job applicants. *getAbstract* recommends Weinstein's pragmatic advice to CEOs, HR managers, small-business owners, and anyone who hires or fires or is seeking work.

Summary

Why Character Counts

When employers recruit job applicants, most focus on what applicants know and the work they must do. Few pay sufficient attention to an applicant's strength of character. Expertise and ability are critical for success, but character counts every bit as much.

The actions of employees who lack character cost companies billions of dollars annually. In its 2014 global survey, the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners determined that companies lose 5% of their revenues to fraud every year. The average annual fraud loss for about 25% of firms was \$1 million or more. Oddly, considering the high stakes, most organizations pay minimal attention to character during employee recruitment or promotion.

"Hiring and promoting fair employees can reduce or eliminate the legal and financial troubles that arise from unfair business practices."

"Sometimes companies are reluctant to bring up character in an interview because they're afraid they're not going to get an honest answer, or that they'll be inviting platitudes," explains Mary Gentile, director of the Giving Voice to Values business curriculum. Joel Manby, president and CEO of Herschend Family Entertainment, adds, "Some companies don't think it's important, or they're not willing to put down a set of behavioral values" and hold people accountable.

Defining Character

Firms might have another reason for not focusing on character during recruitment: Definitions of good character are open to interpretation. For example, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle equated character with virtue. But different eras define virtue differently. Even if everyone agreed on what constitutes character, no one knows how to measure it.

“Given the importance of character, its surprising, even disturbing, that companies pay so little attention to it when hiring and promoting people.”

Workers needn't outright steal to damage their employers. Any “less than exemplary” behavior can cause great harm. Employees who lack character are not productive. “People who have ...’ethical lapses’ are never...high-performing employees,” says Kenneth Meyer, vice president of HR for the Community Healthcare Network. “They’re either marginal or poor performers.” Character encompasses the vital attributes that define identity. Behavior and action – not words – reveal character. People live out their character day to day.

“One of the best tools for evaluating the character of a job candidate or an employee seeking promotion is a direct, in-person, behaviorally focused interview.”

High-character, ethical employees are extremely productive and make notable contributions to the financial well-being of their firms. Clients like doing business with these loyal workers. They make their companies look good, boost morale, rally behind the firm’s missions and goals, and exert a positive influence.

Job Prospects

Determining a person’s character during a brief job interview or a series of interviews can be difficult. Meet this challenge by making the interview “behaviorally focused.” To spur applicants to reveal clues about their characters, ask them to talk about a time when they “had to stand up to someone in authority.” Listen carefully to their answers; observe their body language and nonverbal cues with equal care.

“Integrity is not a single trait but rather the expression of many traits.”

You can administer multiple-choice or true-or-false tests that explore ethical dilemmas. Even though applicants’ answers may not always reflect how they would really act, these tests can spark dialogue about ethical behavior. Employee reference letters also can be problematic unless you know the writer, which automatically gives the references more credibility. A 360-degree feedback exercise offers an effective gauge of an individual’s character.

“Wherever they work, in large or small companies and in any line of business, courageous employees have the strength of character to say and do things that need to be done.”

Work simulations – watching prospective employees in simulated work environments – can be useful for certain professions like teaching – but not all, like surgery. Hiring job applicants on a temporary basis and moving them to permanent status after a probationary period will give you some insight into their on-the-job behavior and performance.

Character Traits

Make the extra effort to hire people who demonstrate high character. The “Good Ones” possess 10 special qualities. “Trustworthiness” and “integrity” don’t appear on this list because they aren’t single

characteristics. They are amalgams of numerous positive character traits. The 10 high-character attributes are:

1. “Honesty”

This means total dedication to the truth. Seek out, recruit, hire and promote honest employees like Brenda Harry, a Goodwill minimum-wage worker. She found \$3,100 in cash in the pocket of a suit jacket someone donated to the organization. She easily could have pocketed the money – which was more than double her monthly pay. Instead, she gave it to her supervisor. Look for this kind of honesty in all future employees. To assess job prospects’ honesty, ask them, “Have you ever cheated and, if so, what did you learn from it?”

2. “Accountability”

People who are accountable live up to their promises. They accept responsibility for their actions. They atone for their errors. Accountability doesn’t only concern an employee’s actions or inactions. The company must also hold itself accountable for its deeds. Many firms don’t. To measure an applicant’s sense of accountability, ask him or her to “describe a situation in which [he/she] took responsibility for a mistake [he/she] made. What were the consequences?”

3. “Care”

Caring employees consider other people’s welfare. Such concern guides their thoughts and actions. Such employees are valuable servant leaders who put “others first.” Hire employees who care about their colleagues and their work and who are fully engaged in their job. Your company will get the most out of its employees if its actions show that it truly cares about everyone who draws a paycheck – from executives to the lowest-paid service workers. To evaluate whether job prospects care about other people, ask, “As a manager, how would you deal with employees who come to work with a cold or flu?”

4. “Courage”

Courageous employees do or say what is right, no matter what the cost. *Time* magazine named Sherron Watkins a Person of the Year in 2002 because she had the courage to turn in her dishonest bosses at Enron. Such brave employees speak their minds to their bosses, whether or not higher-ups want to hear what they have to say. They go to battle on behalf of their clients. They are not afraid to ask for help and they don’t run from hard tasks. Measure the courage of a job applicant by asking for a description of “a time when [he/she] had to disagree with someone in authority and stand [his/her] ground.” Follow up by asking what happened.

5. “Fairness”

Employers who treat everyone fairly dedicate themselves to justice in three forms: Economic justice – The company pays employees equitably; Social justice – The company guarantees employees their full rights; and Procedural justice – The company resolves disputes fairly and without bias. To be sure that they act fairly, managers must guard against their own unconscious biases in hiring, promotions, and so on. They should solicit other points of view before making such decisions. To gauge prospective employees’ attitudes

about fairness and bias, ask them to describe “a time when [they] were discriminated against. How did it affect [them], and what did [they] do as a result?”

6. “Gratitude”

“No man is an island,” poet John Donne noted centuries ago. Everyone relies on everyone else. Employees who exhibit gratitude understand that their success depends on others. They show appreciation toward their colleagues and clients. Yet gratitude often becomes the most expendable of these 10 character traits. Questions directed at job applicants don’t readily establish gratitude. Instead, observe and consider how the applicant deals with the receptionist or other company personnel who aren’t directly involved in the screening process. After people work at your firm for some time, gauge their gratitude with 360-degree reviews.

7. “Humility”

Janice Piacente, compliance officer for a global beverage company, needed to provide the phone number for the firm’s ethics hotline to the whole workforce. She put the number on glass bottles and distributed them to employees. This worked out well. Piacente gave her team credit for the successful project and complimented them on the work. To assess job prospects’ level of humility ask them to tell you about their “proudest accomplishments.” Ask, “What was it, and how did you pull it off?” Do the applicants speak only of their own efforts, or do they include others in the achievement?

8. “Loyalty”

In 2014, all 20,000 employees of Market Basket, a grocery chain in New England, walked off the job to show support for CEO Arthur T. Demoulas, who was fired by the company’s board over his support of employee interests. Market Basket customers boycotted the chain, costing it up to \$1 million in daily losses. The Board quickly rehired Demoulas. That’s exemplary employee loyalty. To measure a prospect’s loyalty, ask, “What were some of the things you liked most about your previous...job?” It’s a good sign if the applicant speaks of former colleagues as “team members.” Observe applicants’ body language when you interview them. Nonverbal signals can be particularly revealing when applicants discuss their former bosses and colleagues.

9. “Patience”

Patient employees focus. They work hard, persist and never quit until they reach their goals. They’re flexible. They don’t require immediate gratification; they take a long-range view of the rewards of hard work. They accept their circumstances. To get an idea of applicants’ patience, ask them to describe a work issue that left them “deeply frustrated” and to relate how they “kept calm and dealt with the problem.”

10. “Presence”

As employees’ workloads increase, many try to deal with the growing pressure by multitasking. Yet, the brain does not handle multitasking well; it becomes inefficient and unproductive. High-character employees focus on the job at hand. That’s the essence of operating in the present and with presence. Employees with

presence don't waste time on nonproductive activities. To assess a prospect's level of presence, ask about "a time when [he/she] was distracted at work and dealt with the distraction successfully."

Character Makes the Difference

Managers must constantly observe and evaluate the character of their direct reports. Use the 10 character traits as a guideline when you consider promotions. Paying attention to the listed traits will help you hire and promote the right kind of people. Add these aspects of character to "your company's mission, vision and value statements." Character counts for everyone, including:

- **Employers** – Communicate to all job prospects that character is a vital component of the jobs they seek. Recount positive, real-life character stories starring your company's employees. Share such stories at company meetings.
- **Job candidates** – Before you interview at a firm, review its code of ethics and its mission and vision statements. Explain to all interviewers that you will hold yourself to the highest ethical standards. Send handwritten notes to interviewers to thank them for their time and to reiterate your dedication to the company's values. Refer to honor and ethical issues during your job search in order to stand out from other applicants.
- **Employees seeking promotion or a salary increase** – Maintain a file of positive notes about you and your high ethical standards from current and previous work colleagues. Share this file with your boss at raise time. During performance reviews, show how your sense of right and wrong and your commitment to doing "the right thing" provide tangible benefits for your company.

About the Author

Bruce Weinstein – a guest on NBC's *Today*, ABC's *Good Morning America* and CNBC's *Fast Money* – is head of The Ethics Guy, LLC, which helps firms hire and promote people of high character. He frequently discusses ethical issues on national talk shows.



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