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Decent People, Decent Company

How to Lead with Character at Work and in Life

Robert L. Turknnett and Carolyn N. Turknnett • Davies-Black © 2005 • 216 pages

Leadership

Take-Aways

- The words, actions, attitudes, experiences and beliefs of an organization's leaders shape its culture.
- However, an organization is a social system. Everyone within it has an effect upon its functioning.
- Maintain your organization's integrity by leading with character no matter what your position in the hierarchy.
- Don't wait for someone else to do it. Do it yourself.
- Strong leaders possess four "soft" traits: "empathy," "humility," "lack of blame" and "emotional mastery."
- They also possess four "hard" traits: "self-confidence," "accountability," "focus on the whole" and "courage."
- Leaders must find a balance between respect and responsibility. Most people lean to one side or the other.
- Good leaders can become great if they develop their weaker character traits.
- Courageous people feel fear and anxiety, but they don't let their feelings stop them.
- Companies that treat their employees decently are more profitable and successful than those that do not.

Recommendation

Robert L. Turknett and Carolyn N. Turknett wrote this book before the corporate scandals of Enron, Tyco and WorldCom, so their emphasis on integrity as a crucial component of leadership is prescient. They believe in emotional and life balance rather than ambition, and cooperation rather than competition. Every chapter is full of examples of people who have taken leadership roles based on these values, showing that it is, in fact, possible. *getAbstract* recommends this book to leaders and aspiring leaders – whether of organizations, companies, departments, or even social or family groups – who wish to find out how they, as individuals, can lead with integrity. Leaders who truly believe in what they are doing and the people they are leading will embrace the challenge of further developing themselves using this leadership character model.

Summary

Integrity is the Foundation

Miep Gies, whose name any reader of *The Diary of Anne Frank* will recognize, did not believe she achieved anything remarkable in protecting the Frank family and their friends, or in saving Anne's diary from destruction. "I am not a hero," she said. "I just did what any decent person would have done." To carry out what she believed was right, Gies defied the Nazis and risked her own life. Yet she never saw herself as particularly courageous or admirable.

“The leadership of any organization plays a primary role in creating its culture.”

Gies, with her deep integrity, is an example for anyone who wishes to be a leader, at any level, in any kind of organization or community. Great leaders inspire others to emulate them and keep their organizations moving in the right direction. They question assumptions and authority, and when they see something wrong, they act to change or fix it. As they and their followers aim for what Gies might have called decency, they establish an organizational "culture of character."

“In all social systems every participant makes a contribution, whether actively or passively, intentionally or unconsciously, creatively or destructively.”

In such cultures, everyone, at every level, feels personally responsible for the organization's progress and ethics. Cultures of character have these traits:

- All members contribute to the group's mission, and feel empowered to question or challenge actions that seem dysfunctional or immoral.
- They take personal pride in the group's success.
- They treat each other humanely and are enthusiastic about their work.

“Changing our minds changes the way we behave, and that makes possible changes in other people and in the very system in which we are operating.”

Organizational integrity is not something leaders can develop and maintain by themselves. It doesn't flow from the top down. Rather, all the members of the group play a part in shaping its culture, by their values

and actions. As theorist David Cooperrider explains, "Organizations are products of human interaction and mind rather than some blind expression of an underlying natural order."

"What you believe about yourself and others, about how organizations work, and about leadership and hierarchies has an enormous impact on what you see and experience in an organization."

Cooperrider says that people generally get what they expect. If they believe they can influence the world around them, or demonstrate what psychologists call "self-efficacy," they will take action. If they have high expectations of their co-workers or subordinates, those people will perform well. In a phenomenon called "behavioral confirmation," people elicit the behavior they are expecting.

Understanding and Respect

To become a truly strong leader, you must achieve a balance between two kinds of personality traits – understanding or respect, and action or responsibility. Most leaders – and most people – do not naturally excel in both areas, but instead lean toward one or the other. Good leaders become great by consciously developing their weaker area – a lifelong process.

"The views people have about themselves and others, and about the way the organization works, make a huge difference in what they see and how they behave. We create our reality."

The Leadership Character Model is a guide to balancing understanding and action. Picture it as a scale whose base is integrity. On one side of the scale are the traits of understanding, respect and relational, "soft," people skills: empathy, emotional mastery, humility, and the ability to withhold blame and focus on solutions.

"Outside events or other people don't cause our emotions...our emotions are the result of how we think and talk to ourselves about these things outside ourselves."

Empathy is the capacity to feel the emotions of another person. To cultivate empathy, try these psychological experiments:

- Tell a story from someone else's perspective.
- Ask questions and practice active listening.
- Identify with characters in books, television shows and movies.
- When speaking with others, "reflect and reframe" to ensure understanding.

"Only when you see yourself as the cause of your feelings will you accept responsibility for changing them."

Humble leaders are sincere and authentic. They look for results, not personal accolades, and they value the work of others. Arrogant people who think they know everything erect barriers between themselves and others. In contrast, trust flows between a humble leader and other people.

Refraining from blame is a practical, proactive approach to problem solving. Blame solves nothing. It demotivates people and causes hard feelings. Instead, take personal responsibility for results and encourage others to do the same. Use your creative energy to find solutions to problems. Ask yourself these questions:

- What could I have done differently to change this outcome?
- What can I do next time to ensure a better outcome?

“Breaking the habit of blaming means accepting the fact that we are all highly fallible human beings, capable of making mistakes and doing things wrong.”

As a leader, you must learn to manage your emotions because you have to be able to think clearly. Inappropriate displays of emotion can cause people to lose respect for you. Control your emotions by doing the following:

- Recognize your feelings, then set them aside. Stay calm.
- Change or manage your negative emotions, and try to avoid destructive or self-defeating behavior.
- Engage in positive "self-talk."

“Effective Self-Management”

Effective self-management (ESM) is a technique for taking control of your emotions. Its basic idea is that people's your perceptions are merely sensory observations – raw data. The brain interprets this data according to your attitudes, beliefs, preconceptions and experiences. Your thoughts or self-talk – what you tell yourself about the sensory data your brain receives – determine your emotional responses. Thus, to change or control your emotions, you must choose different assumptions and beliefs about the raw data. Sending the same data through a different filter results in an alternative emotion. When you choose to think different thoughts about the raw data, for example, by assessing the realistic possibility of a negative outcome, you are reframing your thinking.

“The more comfortable you are with your self-image, and the more self-confident, the less likely it is that you will need to act – to pretend to be – better than others.”

Determine whether your thinking is rational by using the five-step “rational self-analysis” (RSA) process:

1. Describe the observable facts as a neutral third party might relate them.
2. Identify your initial thoughts about the situation.
3. Identify your feelings or emotions.
4. Challenge your thoughts.
5. Think about how you want to feel. What are your emotional goals?

Responsibility and Action

Leaders must take responsibility. They lead by doing. Thus, on the “leadership character scale,” the four soft, people skills balance the four "hard," behavioral skills: "accountability," "courage," "self-confidence" and "focus on the whole."

“Being humble means acknowledging your own imperfections, vulnerabilities and limitations. It also means finding and acknowledging the value in others.”

Accountability is about following through. Leaders take responsibility for the success of projects even if they are involved only in a small part of them. They take ownership. Workers in hierarchies sometimes believe they are stuck because they have "responsibility without authority." Of course, this is a frustrating situation; however, the solution is often to "forget authority: few people have it anymore anyway." Instead, act. Stop asking, "Why can't they...?" and ask "What can I...?"

“Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.” [– Mark Twain]

In business, courage means making ethical decisions – doing the right thing, maintaining high standards and being honest – even when these choices are not easy or cheap. Acting courageously can be stressful – but courageous leaders face the anxiety and do what they know they should do anyway. Increase your courage with these mental exercises:

- Imagine the worst-case scenario and how you would cope with it.
- Learn about the actions of other courageous people.
- Imagine what they would do in your situation.
- Assess the consequences to you or your organization of not acting with courage.

“In an organization with character, ethical issues can't be separate from the ordinary business at hand.”

Self-confident, optimistic leaders inspire their followers to be the same. Increase your self-confidence by using these techniques:

- Conduct an honest self-assessment to identify your strengths, skills and accomplishments. Reframe your thoughts and change your self-talk.
- Step outside your comfort zone and try something new. Acquiring a new skill will increase your confidence.
- Study confident people. Then, role play. Practice acting confident. Envision yourself as successful. To help others build their self-confidence, ask their opinions, draw attention to their strengths, and support their growth and development.

To see the big picture and do what is the best for the organization, analyze how the pieces of a situation fit together. Each piece affects every other piece; nothing operates in isolation.

Building Personal Integrity

When you have integrity, you know yourself and your values, and can communicate them to others. You act on your values and live according to your convictions. You take responsibility for your decisions. Build your personal integrity by:

- Writing a personal mission statement.

- Promising carefully and always honoring your promises. Underpromising and overdelivering is better than the reverse.
- Being totally honest and avoiding exaggeration.
- Thinking before you speak, then speaking carefully and intentionally.
- Following positive role models.

The "Decent" Corporation

Managers and executives with integrity should make sure that their organizations institute ethical policies and processes. Although whistleblowers have saved some businesses from taking disastrous actions, the ethical organization integrates its values into everything it does. It doesn't wait for a last-minute warning. Profit is never the only criterion when it makes a decision. It also considers the social consequences of corporate behavior – although, in fact, companies that act decently are more profitable and successful than those that do not. To encourage ethical behavior on every level of your organization, take the following steps:

- "Create conversational tools" – Appoint an "ethics officer" in every meeting whose job it is to keep an eye on potential problems and competing concerns. Most decisions are complicated; the ethics officer makes sure no one forgets that.
- "Increase transparency" – Make sure everyone in the organization understands its strategies, budgets, financial projections and short- and long-term goals. Instead of feeling burdened with extra information, employees will be more likely to complete projects "on time and within budget."
- "Create a feedback-rich environment" – Conduct regular surveys. Try "reverse mentoring," in which a junior manager teaches a senior one. Use the 360-degree method of evaluating employees and managers.
- "Get outside views" – Especially in morally ambiguous situations, consult with colleagues, scholars and other professionals.
- "Celebrate honesty and accountability" – Acknowledge organizational "heroes" and their courageous acts.

About the Authors

Robert L. Turknett and **Carolyn N. Turknett** co-founded a consulting organization that works with CEOs, executives and leaders of large organizations.



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