

Why

your
character
is important

—Greg McCann

INTEGRITY

VALUES

RESPECT

MORAL

LOYALTY

PRINCIPLE

CITIZENSHIP

REPUTATION

HONOR

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Today, as you leave breakfast with your family, lunch with a business colleague or dinner with a close friend, consider the following: how did they perceive your character? By character I mean at the broadest level, the sum of all of our traits. More helpful though is to define character as how you act when you believe there would be no consequences or if you thought no one was watching. How others perceive our character creates our reputation. Think about how important these two sides of the same coin are—character and reputation. Next consider if these two items are the currency of the realm, then how much time, effort, and reflection are you investing in improving them?

Have you ever heard the axiom: hire on character and develop skills? As any leader knows, it is far easier to help someone develop professional skills than develop character, but that doesn't mean that character cannot be shaped or cultivated. With intention, the help of others and developing a practice, character can be cultivated.

Though character has always been important it is even more so because we live in a time of exponential change. As the pace of communications, careers, technology, health-care, and virtually every area of our lives increases it is harder and less workable to look externally as a way to stay grounded. If you are selecting a career, a business to buy, or a treatment for a chronic illness, these areas may change before

you know it. For example, what if you had selected travel agent or newspaper reporter as a career; Blockbuster as a business to buy; or contracted AIDS, a few years ago? Any of those decisions, if entirely driven by external factors, would be dramatically different today.

Character as a path to know yourself, know what you stand for, and what you won't stand for, provides a way to become more self-aware, stay grounded, have greater integrity, and even enhance your relationships.

Your character can change

There are people that believe character is immutable and set in stone. I believe and it has been my experience that character is forged through the decisions we make, the challenges life presents, and the people in our lives. The phrase to test one's mettle is revealing; not only are our characters subject to being shaped like mettle but done so under heat, pressure, and shaping by others.

Consider the challenges in your life that shaped and even defined who you are today; a demanding coach, a devoted teacher, or even a difficult or humbling event (so-called successes and failures are both opportunities to shape and define us). Did you act with the intention and fortitude you wanted to? If not, did reflection and input from others shift your character? How has your character been forged? How do you plan to shape it in the future?

Ways to cultivate your character: A Practice

Consider viewing the idea of working on your character as analogous to staying in

physical shape. This perspective often proves insightful for people. First each person might choose to emphasize a different area such as strength, flexibility, or endurance. Secondly, working out only works if you do it (i.e. apply it), you can't merely read a book on jogging and reap the benefits: an intellectual understanding may be helpful, but it is not enough! Third, most of us stand a far better chance of sticking with a workout regime or practice if we involve others. Isn't it harder to stay in bed when you know your jogging partner is going to be waiting on the corner for you?

Here are some ways to involve others in your practice. I want to suggest four tools for your practice: feedback, advice, support, and Applied Intelligence. Feedback is having someone you trust tell you what they see in terms of your behavior (e.g. you were very articulate in connecting with the client and communicating the relevant benefits of our product to her in our meeting,) and the impact if the behavior continues (e.g. seen as irresponsible, seen as a potential sales manager, etc.). Advice is seeking out someone you trust who has expertise or experience in the area you are looking for help with. For example, I want to be a better public speaker, so talking with someone who does this is wiser than say talking with my neighbor who is a physician would be. Third is support. Support is when someone validates the effort, struggle, or difficulty we are having. It isn't fixing anything; it is a helpful but often an overlooked tool in our toolkit.

Applied Intelligence may be new to you. This is a framework that my father, Norm





McCann and I have been refining since about 1994. It says that taking responsibility or ownership for our behavior means that we will work mindfully to align our character with our reputation (see chart below). As a practitioner myself I can tell you that from students to executives, this isn't too difficult to understand, but it can be very powerful (even humbling) when applied.

So let's take a simple example, you are fifteen minutes late for a meeting. Do you say, "I know I am late, but the traffic, my spouse, the difficulty finding a parking spot, or whatever is really to blame?" That "yeah but" attitude is defending your behavior. Perhaps the wiser choice might be to consider the impact of your behavior on others in the meeting. So, contrast the "yeah but" behavior with an apology that conveys something along the lines of: "I apologize for being late and wasting everyone's precious time. I know you are all busy people. To make amends I would like to treat for lunch." Which apology would you prefer to get? Which apology are you more apt to give? How do you think other people perceive your character in each case and what reputation results?

On a more complex level, a colleague I knew was a manager in a large, international company. He had recommended one of his team members be promoted. Because of administrative rules the request was turned down since the paperwork had been turned in late. My colleague's superiors had suggested he merely wait till the next round of promotions. Believing that the right thing for him to do was to champion his notable team member, he went to his superiors, at some possible risk to his own reputation and argued for an exception. He won and the person received their promotion. Now how would you perceive that level of conviction and fortitude?

See how developing the ability to step outside of yourself and assess how others

perceive your behavior—while resisting the human tendency to defend it, creates the profoundly helpful opportunity to choose how to act? See how asking trusted colleagues for feedback (how did I do with that apology), advice (here is how I am thinking about apologizing, what do you think?) or support (boy, it wasn't easy to apologize after having a flat tire and having to park 12 blocks away) can help your practice?

Now think how you might be a more considerate member of your family with this work? At work you can be a colleague with greater empathy and integrity. Even in social situations you may have far greater awareness of how you're conveying your character through your behavior. As you are asked to make decisions, you may feel more grounded in who you are and what you stand for.

Conclusion

Viewing your character practice as similar to a workout regime can be helpful to see that it is ongoing, should involve others, and should be tailored to your specific goals. The four tools to utilize in your practice include feedback, advice, support, and most importantly, Applied Intelligence.

Your character is the sum of your traits. Others perception of your character-or reputation, is a vital part of being an effective, happy, grounded person in today's world of exponential change. The good news is that character and therefore reputation can be changed and thus working on it through a conscious practice makes tremendous sense. The choice is yours, the cost is immeasurable, but the real question is: what is it worth to you?

A Character Quiz:

Consider these 5 questions about your character:

1. Can you articulate your five greatest character strengths and three greatest character weaknesses? Until you can, you may be missing the opportunity to build on your strengths and navigate (as well as work on) your weaknesses. If not, who could help you to arrive at this level of awareness?
2. What is your reputation? How do people in your personal and professional lives see your character? Would someone meeting you for the first time have a different perception than someone who has invested the time, patience, and effort to truly get to know you?
3. How well does your personal and professional reputation align with the self-perception you listed in # 1? The bigger this gap (review the chart above), the more you are at risk, whereas the smaller the gap, the more you are likely to be reaping the benefits of such a practice.
4. If you were to develop a practice to cultivate your character who could give you feedback, advice, and support?
5. In some point in the future, what shift in your character and/or reputation would you like to see?

Note we train for competency, measure it, grade it, and monitor it. As such it is a reasonable assumption that everyone interviewing for the job has a reasonable level of competency, but we can't say the same for every candidate's character. Curious isn't it?