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CHARACTER Connect

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Minnesota Character Council

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Leaders With Character Focus on Problem-Solving

Daily, each of us may be troubled, shaken or even personally devastated by the evening news' shocking reports of yet another series of tragedies that have occurred since the previous days' reports of a similar array of wrenching events. Headlines like, "Bridge collapses, killing unsuspecting motorists!" or "Multiple athletes at Border University were determined to have been illegally recruited through alumni association donor!" are so frequent as to numb the senses of viewers and listeners.

Predictably—oh so predictably—is the follow-up to these tragic events and other issues of great importance, though indeed with less "shock" value, is the inane question: "Who is to blame?"

Leaders with character understand that, when tragedies occur or problems arise, affixing blame is well down the list of the most important steps that they need to take to bring resolution to a problem or issue demanding their attention. You see, leaders with character have integrity. They are focused on thoroughly researching the genesis and nature of the problem, seeking viable solutions to the problem, and developing a plan of action to minimize the reoccurrence of that problem in the future. Leaders with character proceed with a goal in mind...solving a problem. They proceed with an open mind, avoiding simplistic solutions to complex issues. They believe in and welcome genuine collaboration.



They accept and weigh alternative points of view. They ensure honesty and fairness are central to the process. They communicate. They develop strategies. They test out/evaluate those strategies to achieve positive outcomes.

Leaders with character realize that their primary leadership function is NOT to affix blame. To do so is to engage in organizational "goal displacement." That is, to displace the primary leadership responsibility, problem-solving, with a secondary or tertiary or even further removed function, finding who is to blame for this problem. Such a decision charts a path that is not beneficial to the organization (which is to solve reoccurrence or minimization of the problem) and is also likely more damaging to ultimately developing the most constructive strategies for preventing a reoccurrence or minimization of the problem.

How so?

Leaders With Character Focus on Problem-Solving . . . continued

When an organizational leader is swayed by public or colleague or subordinate sentiment to “pursue the culprit” and “affix blame” as the primary, highest order organizational focus, predictable, damaging results may well occur even BEFORE the leader can initiate a productive problem-solving process. Organization members may become fearful of recriminations, guilt by association, personal culpability, and much more.

The “affixing blame” focus engenders fear, enhances rumors, increases speculation of those to be blamed, causes truth to be hidden, erodes trust, and closes communication. Such outcomes make future, quality problem-solving eminently more difficult to conduct and conclude and, frequently, make resultant problem-solving and strategy generation flawed.

Mind you, no one would suggest that organizational accountability should be abandoned, and poor performance not addressed and corrected, but it should be affirmed that the primary function of a leader of character is to lead an organization in problem identification, problem-solving, strategy development, and, first and foremost, leaving “blame affixing” to a much later time in the problem-solving process ... if at all.

—By Roger Worner, consultant and former school superintendent

Courage

Courage can mean different things to different people. There is, however, a more classical definition that resonates with all who have studied the concept. In Greek mythology, Prometheus is a Titan god of fire. Prometheus is credited with the creation of humanity from clay, and of defying the gods by stealing fire and giving it to humanity as a path to civilization. To punish Prometheus, Zeus chains him to a rock on a mountain peak. Every day an eagle rips at Prometheus's body and eats his liver, and every night the liver grows back. Because Prometheus was immortal, he could not die. Instead he suffered endlessly. Prometheus knew full well his punishment if he gave fire to humans, but he did it anyway. Why would someone do that?



The answer is based upon three motive concepts; responsibility, discipline and joy.

- The temple of courage is entered through the courtyard of responsibility. Prometheus was responsible for humans, after all, he created them. Responsibility always takes a direct object – responsible to whom, to what? One can be responsible for, or to, an idea, a family, a person, a community, a nation. And this responsibility begs two questions: What are you willing to die for? What are you willing to live for? This is the beginning of understanding courage.
- Discipline is a necessary condition for courage as it suggests an inner strength. Discipline comes from disciple. It too begs two questions: Who is your teacher? Who is the captain of your soul?
- Joy may be the clearest concept to master, but the most difficult to achieve. This is true because the only way to experience joy and happiness is through engaging responsibility and living a disciplined life. We serve a family or community, for example, not because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the joyful thing to do. But to do so takes more courage than on a battle field.

Courage is a simple act, yet one of the most profound actions that a person can take.

—By Michael Hartoonian, Ph.D., Professor (retired), University of Minnesota, Twin Cities and MCC member

The Black Swan of Character

Nicholas Taleb notes that a Black Swan event is unpredictable, has a major impact, and eventually, we declare it had factors that allowed it to be seen if only we had recognized the factors. The pandemic was a Black Swan event. Previous epidemics, scientific prediction of the possibility, and the number of existing world viruses made Covid-19 a of the question of when not if.

Taleb notes that we cannot predict every Black Swan, but we can build “robustness,” which is an attitude of allowing nothing to fail during periods of change. Minnesota and the United States face several Black Swans. We understand the challenges that society and education face, yet we are uncertain how to build “robustness.”

What we desire is a quality of character, the ability for moral and ethical traits, where we act with honesty, respect, caring, and responsibility. We believe we are responsible for our decisions, but often lack the context of understanding the long-term implications of our choices, along with the acceptance that responsibility requires both psychological and financial commitment.

If we are to build Taleb’s “robustness” into Minnesota life, we need to connect global community skills into our curriculum and thinking, where ethics become an automatic segment of our thought process. In a perfect world, this would automatically come from the family. The reality is that it often does not in our modern society.

What is required is a different approach. Character education in the past has not always produced the desired results. This is because it was assumed that a few minutes of class discussion and posters on the walls would shape all other cultural factors. It did not and will not. A comprehensive approach is needed which includes a discussion of values, support for daycare and early education, economic family support, recruitment and retention of minority teachers, financial commitment to education over a longer period, and a stronger public understanding that character is part of a required political and societal process.

We have a beginning understanding of our potential Black Swans. These include the implications of a divided American politics, the probable variants of emerging pandemics, the impact of uneven educational and economic outcomes for large numbers of students, the growing racial, ethnic and economic separations provide a picture of a future that changes the nature of the America we desire and require.

The irony is that we have the resources, the educational leaders, and the knowledge for “robustness” to become woven into the necessary renewal. This renewal will be successful only within the context of character, which reflects an expansion of the skills necessary for relating human needs with the future. We can do this. What we require is the will.

—By Todd Lefko, President of the International Business Development Council and MCC member

Climate Crisis Pushes Schools Forward

Schools generate new possibilities for communities as one generation helps the next adapt to change. Collaboration helped us through the Great Depression, World War II and the Pandemic. Today’s climate emergency has amplified the role of schools and learning as we adapt to unprecedented changes in our communities. Learning has become a priority for the 7.8 billion people on Earth who confront worsening climate variables in their local ecosystem, economy and community. Educators are designing responses to the challenges described in the Stern Report (2006), IPCC Climate Report (2018) and International Energy Agency Climate Report (2021).



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Climate Crisis Pushes Schools Forward . . . continued

With community partners, educators can weave character assets, skills and stewardship into a more sustainable and stable future for our youth.

Climate reports indicate recent heat waves, droughts and fires in the west are the beginning of an unprecedented learning challenge for American schools. The good news is that schools focus hope and community assets, guiding youth to expand their capacity for caring, committing and creating better opportunities for themselves and their communities. Rising risks from fossil fuel emissions are bringing local and national communities together with collaborative problem solving. This unparalleled challenge can add global assets and partners to the learning equation. Educators use collaborative skills and hopes with local partners to empower the cognitive, affective and creative domains of young citizens. Learning leaders understand this global process offers opportunities to focus character, define student gifts and invest hours of service while improving community systems and citizenship.

This climate challenge is a global threat being addressed by schools in every nation. Students learn to improve local systems by adding quality to our ecosystem, economy, community and civic systems. Educators improve our choices and problem solving with support and mentoring from these collaborating partners. Problem solving projects and presentations develop critical leadership while encouraging city, county, state, national and global outreach to learning partners. Educators, students and community partners can utilize this climate crisis to develop character, improve local systems and protect our biosphere. Curriculum designs are helping students develop projects with mentoring that supports system improvement.

Projects and presentations generate focus, skills and service for students while renewing hope and building relationships with partners and mentors. Hope is our most renewable energy. Schools are the institutions that offer this generational alchemy. Schools help youth grow civic virtues at this critical time in their personal development. Educators and students can work with business, ecosystem, community health and civic partners to prepare students with projects that expand American teamwork. Problem-solving projects build competencies and can unify local, national and global partners focused on climate. Educators and schools weave understanding, motivation and teamwork with partners to strengthen our adaptation at this critical moment.

—By Bill Mittlefehldt, Cross Currents Consultant and MCC member

School of Character Certification

Schools that have received certification as a State or National School of Character have reported improvements in academic achievement, behavior, school climate, teacher retention and parent engagement. Certification is available through an application and evaluation process. Using the 11 Principles framework, applicants document how they have implemented these standards. Applicants receive a score sheet with comments citing strengths, areas of growth and potential Promising Practices. Applicants meeting the criteria may be named a State or National School/District of Character. Certification is valid for five years.

Synergy & Leadership Exchange is the state sponsor and works in partnership with Character.org, the national founder, to provide the Schools of Character program in Minnesota. The 2022 application opened June 7, 2021 and will close November 19, 2021.



Prior to applying, applicants may want to reflect on their school's character development work. A self-assessment tool, scoring guide and self-tabulating score sheet are available to assess the school's implementation of the 11 Principles. To learn more about the application process and 11 Principles, contact Barb Bergseth, the Minnesota Schools of Character coordinator, at bbergseth@synergyexchange.org or visit <https://www.character.org/application-information>.