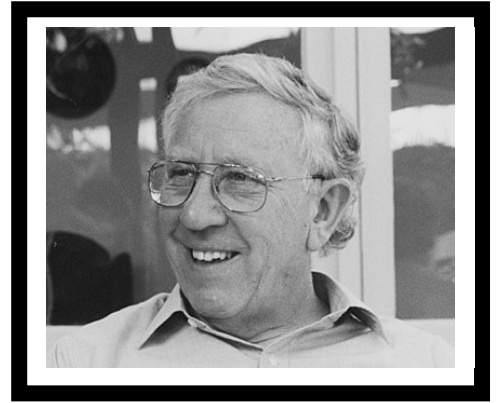


Character the Key to Leadership

John Heenan | November 2008

It is fifteen years since the formation of the NZ Foundation for Character Education. Work on the Cornerstone Values project started earlier in 1989 with the reforms known as "Tomorrow's Schools." Those reforms included school charters with the provision for boards of trustees to include local learning objectives. The teaching of eight cornerstone values - honesty, respect, responsibility, kindness, consideration, compassion, obedience and duty - was the only local learning objective included in the Waihopai School charter. As they say, "The rest is history." However, it is interesting to look back and reflect on how the project evolved. Initially, the focus was on "values" and "values education." Indeed, the NZ Foundation for Character Education was registered in March 1993 as the NZ Foundation for Values Education. The Foundation's first publication was "Cornerstone Values - A Values Education Curriculum." The limitation of the term "values" was soon realized.



The term "values" means whatever the speaker assumes it means. Just as the description, a "nice" meal means nothing more than a meal that the speaker enjoyed. That early focus on "values" and "values education" was like driving around a cul-de-sac. You did not get anywhere - there were no out-comes. The realization that what we were really talking was "character" and not "values" and "character education" and not "values education" was a tremendous revelation. When you say what you mean and mean what you say communication is simple. Although obvious now, that revelation of the difference between "values education" and "character education" was like driving out of the cul-de-sac onto the highway.

"Character" and "character education" like a highway has destinations. "Values education" is about the quality of students' thinking, character education is about the quality of students' behaviour. Character builds a just, caring and civil society regardless of whether that society is a family, a classroom, a school or a nation. Character education only has positive and constructive outcomes that benefit the individual and others. The importance of character has been understood for centuries. Perhaps the ancients had a greater understanding of its importance than our generation.

My purpose today is to explore the link between character and leadership but first we must remind ourselves of what character is.

The traditional understanding from the Hebrews and Greeks onward is that character is the inner form that makes anyone or anything what it is – whether a person, a wine, or a period in history. Character is distinct from such concepts as personality, image, or reputation. Applied to a person it is the essential "stuff" that one is made of, the inner reality in which thoughts, speech, decisions and relationships are rooted. As such, ***character determines behaviour just as behaviour demonstrates character.*** Character is not directly observable. It is an individual's behaviour that is observed and that behaviour which defines an individual's character. One's character is observed by others through the looking glass of one's behaviour. That character is observed through behaviour is illustrated by an extract from "Mark of the Lion - The story of Captain Charles Upham V.C. and Bar." The extract concerns the evacuation of Allied Forces from Crete during World War II.

"It was a march of some forty miles to the south coast. The road seemed to lead upward all the way, with interminable zigzags, hairpin bends, and over mountain ridges reaching 3000 feet. To men who were fresh and fit this would have been a physical effort of some magnitude. But to the Kiwis, Australians, and British troops who were exhausted from lack of sleep, short of food and water, defeated by the weight and shock of never-ending air attack, and whose courage had been futile in the absence of adequate fighting equipment, here was the culminating ordeal. To fall behind was to be taken prisoner. To continue ahead was to drive the body to unattainable lengths of endurance. Kippenberger watched as his troops trudge past. They were still together, still organised, the product of firm but tolerant leadership. His men had gone for hours without water, and many had no water-bottles to fill even when the rare wells were reached. He looked with some concern as the battalion Padre, Spence, came past. Spence had several water bottles hanging around his belt. "I see you are well equipped with water bottles, Padre," said Kippenberger, attempting to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "Oh yes," came the reply. "I just carry one or two in case any of the boys are short." Kippenberger noticed then that the Padre's own lips were cracked and parched and his face grey with fatigue. And the voice of the Padre was the thin gritty voice of a man who had not touched water for a long time. He later wrote: 'I think it was the most Christ-like thing I ever saw.'



Character is observed through behaviour and expresses most deeply what constitutes a person as a unique individual. Character, as rooted in the Greek word for a graphic symbol depicting a hallmark or other distinguishing sign is the indelible stamp on a person beneath all masks, poses, guises and social veneers. Character is the core of a person – “Who we are when no one sees.” Communities and societies are vulnerable unless citizens whose characters are comprised of such individual virtues as loyalty, charity, compassion, civility and duty under gird them. Such citizens act on motives superior to their own immediate self-interest. They keep the law, respect human life and property, help the unfortunate and meet their obligation to society by the payment of due taxes.

Character is never simply inherited. Nor does it grow on its own like a weed. It has to be formed and cultivated. Character develops over time. We may think that a person’s character is formed early in life but we do not know how much or how early character develops. We do know that character does not develop quickly and that it is refined over a life time.

Character and Leadership

Character is central to good leadership – not just political leadership, but the leadership of mums and dads, principals and teachers, managers and administrators and everyone who influences lives around them. General Norman Schwarzkopf put it this way:

“The main ingredient of good leadership is good character. This is because leadership involves conduct and conduct is determined by values.” [Character]

Leadership is fundamentally about who we are rather than what we are. Leadership is about character. Character in leaders is important for a number of reasons:

1. Character provides the link of trust between leaders and followers.

Followers who have trust in their leader act that trust by contributing to the organization. It is through trust that individuals bond to a leader and an organization. But that trust is fragile. It can be easily damaged. A top example is bureaucratic compliance. Burdensome compliance is counterproductive - it destroys trust and reduces commitment and willingness to accept responsibility. The casualty is volunteerism - a willing to contribute to the well being of others or an organization. Volunteerism is about “going the second mile.” As compliance increases volunteerism decreases. It is far better to build trust, respect followers and encourage the acceptance of responsibility.

2. Character provides the leader’s deepest source of being and strongest source of restraint.

In many instances the first prompting to do “good” and the last barrier against doing wrong are the same – character. Character is both the motivation and the final restraint.

3. Character traits - integrity, respect and responsibility - are key components of good leadership.

These character traits - integrity, respect and responsibility - are observed in a leader’s behaviour and manifested in a leader’s relationships. Perhaps in recent decades there has been greater focus on the skills of management rather than the qualities of leadership. It is said that “managers are people who do things right while leaders are people who do the right thing.” I remember attending an Education Management Conference when the after dinner speaker was the late Dr. Beby, legendary Director General of Education. He commented that the best advice he ever received on management came from a hundred year old publication: “Steer by the compass and lie to the wind.” He went on to speak eloquently in yachting terms of the skills and strategies required to “lie to the wind.” Management requires skills and strategies but good leadership requires much more. Good leadership requires good character.

4. No style of leadership is effective over time unless it is rooted in character that inspires trust and commitment.

It is almost impossible to sustain anything, let alone leadership, over time unless it is of substance. Fads and fashions all have their day. So too, do leadership styles. The best leaders have qualities that are rooted in character. The best leaders:

- Both goal and people oriented
- Don’t try and lead alone
- Listen to constructive criticism
- Accept responsibility
- Put the best interest of others before their own
- Held accountable for the authority they exercise
- Lead by example

- Keep in touch with the work being undertaken
- Seek out wise advisers
- Held accountable for those they lead

Strength and goodness

Good leaders pursue excellence. Excellence, in a leadership context, is being the best person you can in terms of doing what is right for your organization. This requires two qualities - strength and goodness - both are determined by character traits. These twin siblings of leadership - strength and goodness - parallel Lickona and Davidson's concept of "Smart and Good High Schools." Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson, State University of New York College, Cortland have developed the concept of "Smart and Good High Schools." Their report may be downloaded from <http://www.cortland.edu/character/highschool/> This concept of "smart and good" high schools is extracted from the historical view that education has two goals – the mastery of skills and the building of character.

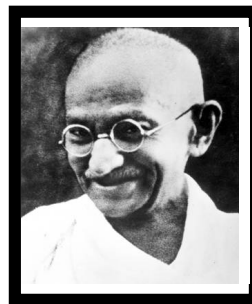
Their executive summary begins.

“Throughout history, and in cultures all over the world, education rightly conceived has had two great goals: to help students to become smart and to help them become good. They need character for both. They need character qualities such as diligence, a strong work ethic, and a positive attitude in order to do their best in school and succeed in life. They need character qualities such as honesty, respect and fairness in order to live and work with others.”

There are parallels between the concept “good and smart” high schools and “good and strong” leadership. A leader's character is observed through their behaviour. A person of strong character shows drive, energy, determination, self-discipline, commitment, will-power and nerve. A leader with these qualities attracts followers. On the other hand, a person of weak character does not display these qualities. They may be disorganised, vacillate or be inconsistent. A leader with these qualities does not attract followers. A person of strong character can be either a good or a bad leader. A strong leader is not necessarily a good leader.



Think of Adolf Hitler, Robert Mugabe or Joseph Stalin in contrast to Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela or George Washington. Strong character is not necessarily coupled with good character. A gang leader is an example of a strong leader with a bad character while an outstanding community leader will have both strong and good character traits. Integrity, respect and responsibility are the three pillars of good leadership. Strong and good leadership and strong and good character are inextricably linked.



Good Leaders Exercise Authority Wisely

Leadership inevitably involves the exercise of authority. Authority is the power to make people do as they are told. Authority, regardless of whether it is exercised by a policeman, a principal or teacher, a team captain or a school monitor is never personally owned. It belongs to the position or office and is given on trust to be exercised with honesty, fairness and gentleness - integrity. The authority of a school principal is not personally owned but derived from the position and the school's board of trustees. The manner in which authority is exercised influences the quality of leadership. The exercise of authority, like behaviour and leadership, is inextricably linked to character.

Strengthening a Leader's Character

The eight cornerstone values - honesty, respect, responsibility, kindness, consideration, compassion, obedience and duty along with other character traits reproduce themselves as they are practised. They are gained as they are given and given as they are gained. Honesty, for example spawns trust, respect and loyalty. This explains why, when a school teaches cornerstone values definitions and backs that teaching up by advocating, modelling and having students experience them the school culture is transformed. In the same way a leader can transform his/her leadership by focusing on personal character

traits. The experience of everyone working with character education is that their own character is strengthened. A simple worksheet is an effective way to action selected character traits.

Conclusion

The Cornerstone Values Project has evolved from:

Understanding that character is the cornerstone of a civil society, to understanding the connection between character and behaviour, to understanding the connection between character and school culture to understanding the connection between character and leadership. Perhaps understanding the connection between character and leadership completes a circle and indeed the evolution of the rationale of the Cornerstone Values project.

In terms of leadership two things are clear.

1. Get your character right and the rest of your leadership will be a matter of detail.
2. Who you are as a leader should be intertwined with who you are as a person.

John Heenan – Presented to the Secondary Schools' - Character and Leadership, 19 November 2008, Wellington College, New Zealand