

# The Crisis of Character!

## *The Process of Leadership and How It Influences Our Corporate Character*

By R. Bruce Bickel

WE'RE AT A CRISIS in our culture. It's not a crisis of security, although that's of prime importance to our citizenry. And it's not a crisis of terrorism, although that's an issue of concern for our world. The crisis that concerns me most is one that's far more dangerous because it's so subtle. It's not always observable, but it's like a festering cancer that eats away at the very fiber of American society. The implications may not be as immediate as those of global terrorism, but the long-term impact will be far more destructive. It's a crisis of character.

One only needs to consider the recent scandals that have rocked the business world—Enron, Tyco, WorldCom and Arthur Andersen are a few of the more publicized versions of this crisis.

We see the same manifestations in government as partisanship takes the place of developing good policy. It's as though party leaders think they "own the country," rather than remembering they've been elected to "guide the country." Neither the Democrats nor Republicans own the Ship of State; they're just supposed to steer it.

The damage assessment to our culture is far deeper than this, however. The greatest injury to American society is in the erosion of ethical leadership. We've forgotten that organizations of character are created by leaders of character. We can either conform to society or transform it. To do the latter, we must begin to think differently about ourselves and those with whom we relate (Romans 12:2).

### **The Heart of Transformation**

The basis of transformation must have its foundation in the realization that character precedes conduct, because *who we are* determines *what we do* (Matthew 7:17-18). And who we are is a function of how we think of ourselves in relationship to those with whom we work and serve (Philippians 3:2-4). Our conduct results in consequences and consequences lead to feelings. Transformational leadership means *how we think* determines *how we act*, which in turn, determines *how we feel* (Ps 119:59). If we think right and act right, we'll feel right. Feelings are the result, not the reason or motivation for our actions (Phil 4:8).

When we as a culture attempt to keep pace with the myriad of changes thrust upon us, the sense of stability is often sacrificed on the altar of pragmatism. "If it works" has become the battle cry of the aspiring, at the expense of the more historical American virtue: "Is it right?"

### **Understanding Morals Vs. Ethics**

Consequently, in the quest for success, corporations in both the profit and nonprofit sectors have been exposed as less than "ethical" in some of their practices. While the common man cries for security, society as a whole is attempting to achieve a marriage of political correctness

and personal responsibility, often positioning the minority opinion as the ruling standard. Can the scales be balanced in such a dilemma?

There's still hope for us as a people, but it requires understanding the difference between morals and ethics. In our modern culture, there's great confusion between the concepts of morals and ethics. Today the words are nearly synonymous, but historically there's a vast difference. The word "morals" come from the Greek word *mores*, describing the shifting changes in society—literally it means *ever changing*.

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Societal changes bring about moral adaptations that are reflections of current trends. One only has to look at the contrast between the morals of the past generation and our current code of conduct to recognize the significant lessening of what used to be the standard. The next generation, I suggest, will experience a similar demise in the morality that characterized the first decade of this millennium.

In contrast, our word "ethics" comes from the Greek word *ethos* and describes the ideas of security and stability. Read early Greek literature and you'll find the word used to describe a place one would go to for protection in the midst of a storm. Literally, the word means a "stall" for horses; hence a place of stability and permanence.

Ethics refer to a set of standards that are absolute and normative for the manner in which one can organize information to determine one's obligations, responsibilities or duties. Ethics result in a set of imperatives that establishes acceptable behavior. Thus, it has come to imply the concept of a plumb line, the standard of rule by which all measurements are made in order to create uniformity and solidarity, hence an environment of stability and security. We need to be much more concerned about our ethics than our morality. One is stable; the other changes.

While morality is concerned with *what people do*, ethics is concerned with *what people ought to do*. The resulting confusion of the amalgamation of these two words is that society at the macro level and organizations at the micro level establish the norms. And that which is normal is then identified as the absolute.

Because of the fluid nature of culture and organizations, relativism has replaced the absolute. Pollsters now determine the norm for both human and organizational behavior based upon statistical analysis. Majority opinion determines behavioral conduct, often with little or no regard for a plumb line. Duty and obligation to one another or for one another become floating norms, since nothing is absolute.

## The Foundation of Character

What should be the basis for individual or corporate ethical decision-making? It may be helpful for us to understand the difference between temperament, personality and character. Temperament refers to the natural inclinations with which one is born. Personality is the expression of one's temperament, and character is the quality of one's personality. The first two cannot be changed, but we can modify, refine and build character.

Thus, one can have a strong-willed child and a weak-willed child and they both can be respectful and diligent. Likewise, one can have a strong-willed employee and a weak-willed employee and they both can be punctual. Granted, it may take more effort to build these traits in one or the other, but both can develop the same character qualities.

Character, then, becomes the foundational ingredient for developing within any structure of human relationships an environment of stability and security. A character ethos or disposition becomes our plumb line.

## The Influencing Process

Leadership, in its most basic sense, is influencing the behavior of people. Classically, management has been defined as influencing the behavior of people toward the accomplishment of a common goal. In recent years, theorists have combined the two, defining leadership in the broader sense as "the influencing process of both leaders and followers to achieve organizational objectives through change."

While one may have a preference as to which concept to support, decision-making remains an untouched absolute. The most visible feature of one's leadership practice is decision-making. Politicians are elected based on the anticipated decisions they'll make once placed in office. Executives are selected and positioned in places of authority based upon a history of past decision-making that has benefited an organization and the anticipated continuation of such activity. The outcome of decision-making is the legacy of any leader.

If our nation is going to reestablish itself as a nation of character, our organizations' leadership, and its employees' service must be a reflection of their character as much as their skills.

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