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In Character

Leader traits contribute significantly to the prediction of leader effectiveness, leader emergence, and leader advancement.

—Zaccaro, Kemp, and Bader (2004, p. 119)

Performance Through Force of Character

The 36 interviewed leaders were “real characters.” They were real leaders in diverse leadership roles across a wide range of contexts. Their uniqueness of character and accomplishment was such that they stood out and were noticed. Moreover, the interviewees were very self-aware of their defining character traits.

Character is the peculiar quality, or sum of qualities, by which a person is distinguished from others; it is the unique stamp imprinted by the interaction of nature, education, or habit describing who that person really is. It is a term used to describe a person’s attributes, traits, or abilities. Character is also associated with the moral or ethical principles that motivate and direct one’s life.

It is notable, then, that when asked to describe their leadership performance, that is, their defining approaches to influencing others toward the achievement of goals, the 36 leaders most often spoke about the importance of character first. Furthermore, their reflections strongly suggested that their leadership performance was necessarily in character because it naturally emanated from their core values (e.g., human dignity, hard work, high standards, competence, productive thinking, service to others, and making a difference).

In describing attributes of their leadership character, the interviewed leaders shared the essence of *who* they perceived themselves to be. For example, Richard Bissen perceived himself as trustworthy, and Beth Stevenson described herself as empathetic. Such self-described character traits address an important dimension of leadership performance. In the minds of the interviewed leaders, the way they saw themselves, as well as the way they believed

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others saw them, mattered greatly to how they influenced others. How they performed their leadership roles emanated from force of character aligned to core values. And, as revealed through their collective reflections, the interviewees perceived their leadership character to be predominantly *humble*, *passionate*, and *contemplative* in character.

Humble

The interviewed leaders portrayed themselves as a humble lot. They were certainly not humbled, however, by any sense of inadequacy. They all had ample and just reason to feel confident about their ability to lead and otherwise contribute within their respective roles. Rather, the humility referenced in reflections about the character of their leadership performance conveyed a sense of service to a greater pur-

“The biggest threat to leadership is hubris.”

—Patrick Sayne

pose and community. They were committed to serve a compelling purpose, and that, in turn, oriented them to serve others toward the achievement of that purpose. The interviewees were also appropriately humbled by the magnitude of moral responsibility that accompanied their leadership roles, as well as consciously committed to avoiding the perils of insolence and arrogance that too often afflict individuals in formal leadership positions.

The 36 leaders were aware of their acknowledged leadership success, but at the same time, they consciously embraced humility. Perhaps this was so because most of them had not set out to be leaders. As Frank Lukasavitz noted, the role of leader was an unanticipated gift: “To be described as a leader is very uncomfortable for me. My life had humble beginnings, and I consider this a very rich ending.”

Rather than planning for leadership, the interviewed leaders were pulled into their leadership roles by necessity and circumstance. Even many years after first assuming formal leadership roles and the attendant power and authority thereof, they remained humbled by their charge. Mechai Viraviadya phrased it this way: “The most important thing is not to take yourself too seriously. You are only one of six billion people on this planet, so you have to keep it in perspective and do the best that you can do.” At the pinnacle of political power as Prime Minister of New Zealand, Helen Clark was very clear about that sentiment in describing her place in history: “I’m here because people have put their trust in me, not to rule the world.”

While leadership itself can be intoxicating, Julianne Lowe was careful to warn against the siren call of power.

I know that in roles like this, people put you up on a pedestal . . . if you are organizing things and leading a group. It is easy to start thinking of yourself that way. You have to be careful and not get carried away with yourself.

With the same cautionary note, Kuami Pianim admitted that it took some years to develop a humble perspective.

When I was young I was taught that I was lucky and brilliant; as you get older you become humble. These talents have been given not only for yourself but to share and bring others up.

Most of the leaders conveyed clear understanding of their role as that of supporting the success of others, rather than seeking affirmation of self. Nola Hambleton was very insightful about the subtlety of her contributions to the success of others.

You can be very self-deprecating and say, well, I'm not very good at this. There are days when I think, "Why is this day different than another? Why do I feel successful today when I didn't yesterday?" I guess I feel successful when I've negotiated something quietly or I've sown the seeds of an idea and seen it come to fruition . . . standing back and knowing that I've done something [and] that no one will probably know that [what] I've done has made a difference to someone.

Perhaps Richard Bissen best captured the leaders' appreciation for a humble perspective of self when he observed, "I take my job seriously, but I don't take myself seriously." This and many similar comments from the interviewed leaders spoke to a social sense of leadership virtue—a perception that their paramount leadership role was to serve the welfare of others.

Within their affirmation of humility, the interviewees also shared observations that further defined the dimensions of that general character trait. Specifically, they described the affiliated qualities of being *respectful*, *empathetic*, and *trustworthy*.

RESPECTFUL

The interviewed leaders were all highly respected by others for their leadership qualities. They, in turn, spoke forcefully about the importance of respecting others. Their position was that one was not likely to

be perceptively tuned in and empathetic to the wants and needs of others if there was not also an underlying element of respect. Leotis Watson did not

"I never want to disparage anyone."

—Rod Chamberlain

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mince words about his approach to the issue: "You ask anyone and they will say that I respect them." Leotis also observed that this simple rule kept him grounded in his fundamental values. "I have a foundation for myself, to treat everyone fairly as I would want to be treated. It gives me the direction that I need."

Gavan Flick, the only Aboriginal art dealer in Sydney, Australia, was passionate about the importance of respect toward others.

This community was built on respect. Every book written about us [Aboriginal people] describes a nomadic people. But we didn't just get up and walk into someone else's home. We couldn't do that. Just as today you wouldn't go into the neighbor's yard and use their pool or barbecue. You would have to be invited. Everything in our life was based on respect. You grew up respecting one another, the elders. Respect is also earned—you have to do the right thing to earn it. It's a two-way street.

Gavan talked at length about the need to treat his customers, employees, and the artists he represented with the respect that he felt they all deserved. Bob Knight applied a similar outlook in the corporate setting.

I don't treat them like an employee. I don't refer to them as my worker, but rather as my associates. We are doing this together.

In moving from a corporate culture to a university position, John Hood not only held his new colleagues in high esteem but expected others to do so as well.

Respect for the dignity of other people is very important to me. It doesn't matter who they are, what they are, what their views are. I think people here know that I am not tolerant of any participation by colleagues that isn't respectful. If someone doesn't want to participate in that type of forum, I drop the person's contribution gate very quickly.

A leadership disposition to be respectful is probably more easily exercised when business is running smoothly. The true test might come in a time of challenge and conflict. Don Hazelwood, Concertmaster for the Sydney Symphony, nurtured a deep sense of the worth of others, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Unpleasantness occurs and you have to deal with them. I think you have to say the thing as you see it yourself. You've got to be diplomatic, but you have to couch it in terms that allow an opening for the person to avoid total embarrassment. You don't cut off a person's possibility of retreating from a situation. You can't cut off a person's dignity. That applies to everything in life, not just music. A person has to be approached if they are not reaching a certain standard, but they have to be allowed an opportunity to retreat from it in the most dignified manner that they can. Otherwise you are doing more damage than [good].

Working in a multinational, multicultural environment helped Brenda Schoonover prioritize the importance of conveying respect to others.

During my early Peace Corps training, I learned that almost all cultures have the same value system, but it is the order in which those values are sometimes put that causes a lot of problems. Being sensitive to the culture and also respecting it is so important. The importance of respecting other cultures is something we need to take heed of, and show more sensitivity to, than some of us have done in the past.

Boon Yoon Chiang agreed:

In Singapore, it is important to be sensitive to cultural traditions. I encourage everyone to bring part of their culture into the organization and to share their ideas.

In some instances, the character trait of being respectful was directly addressed through the proactive building of mutual understanding. In those instances, leaders actively cultivated and modeled mutual respect within their organizations. Mandy Macleod and CJ Nickerson used structured team-building processes to help employees understand each other better and develop more productive relationships. Mandy engaged her staff in a process called True Colors (Miscisin & Haines, 2001), a simplified personality type indicator to reveal and value strengths and differences within a group. CJ used the similar, but more sophisticated, Myers-Briggs personality type indicator (Kiersey & Bates, 1984). For both, the purpose was to build bridges of understanding and mutual respect, as well as to proactively minimize detrimental conflict.

Both overtly and covertly, the trait of being respectful to others emerged from the leaders' strong belief in the worth and dignity of all people, as well as from their commitment to be of humble service to others. Tim Brighthouse exemplified this perspective in expressing confidence about the innate potential of human beings.

I believe that most people have the capacity to do amazing things and that our job is to unlock what they can do. I want to make everyone feel special and unlock that potential.

Christine Rodriguez recognized that nevertheless, being respectful was a learned trait.

One of the biggest lessons I have learned is that not everyone has the same drive, ambition, and work ethic that I have. In order to lead and motivate people, I have to accept that. I have learned to identify their strengths and weaknesses. I have had to learn to not be judgmental, because a good leader is not judgmental. You have to take the best and make the best of everyone.

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EMPATHETIC

It would be difficult to respectfully engage others toward the achievement of goals if one were not attuned to both the overt and covert cues employed in human communication. Notably, most of the 36 leaders saw themselves as fairly perceptive of, and thereby responsive to, other people. Leotis Watson suggested

"I try to keep in mind where everyone is coming from."

—Beth Stevenson

that such was the case, when he observed, "I pay attention to everyone and everything." Julianne Lowe, nevertheless, thought that there might be some gender differences in such ability.

I think women are better at this. They notice things: a new haircut, a shirt someone is wearing. I had two ladies on this trip that stayed on the coach, and one had a hearing loss. I told her about my audiology training and she was delighted, and I could sense her thinking, "Oh, she understands." It's finding something that lets them know that you know how they think or that you think they are special. In nursing, you learn to pay attention. You can read what's going on, so you can connect with them. They may say they are fine, but they are not fine at all. To me, it is very important to understand what's worrying them; then you can unwind that and they know you can recognize it—they melt somehow.

It is obviously important for politicians to pay attention to what others are communicating about their wants and needs. Helen Clark was aware that she "had developed a good sense of what people feel." How else, she observed, could she hope to effectively serve their perceived interests? John Hood agreed, in stating that he had honed "a lifelong 'other' sense" and "purposely studied people closely." Whether through personal conversation, observation, or, as Richard Bissen put it, just an intuitive disposition to "pay attention to the details," the interviewed leaders saw themselves as characteristically perceptive about people. It was a trait that they prized highly and worked overtly to develop. Moreover, it reflected a cultivated social capacity for empathy.

Empathy, the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and know what they are thinking and feeling, moved the leaders beyond superficial perception of what was going on in others' heads or what messages were being communicated. This was a social instinct that enabled them to identify with the perceptions and experiences of others at a deeper level.

In presenting themselves as empathetic, the interviewed leaders described how that leadership trait benefited others. Kuami Pianim spent 10 years as a political prisoner. That experience reinforced his appreciation for the importance of empathy as a means to connect with other people.

You need to live not too far away from people. I realized in prison that when you are talking to a person, they must realize that you are not too far away from the problem. If you cannot have empathy, you cannot be a good politician.

On a pragmatic level, Rod Chamberlain realized the value of empathy to his leadership perception that no one, including him, had all the answers and that most people were doing their very best to make worthy contributions to the cause. "I try to have conversation to create understanding both ways."

Beth Stevenson admired the empathetic character of one of her mentors and emulated those qualities herself.

One of my mentors was a master at creating a network of belonging. She talked to everyone. I try to keep in mind where everyone is coming from. I believe that people are trying to do good. So matching individual techniques to individual people and your purpose is the best.

Empathy might be misinterpreted as a "soft" aspect of leadership and therefore not be fully appreciated. Fanny Law, Secretary for Education and Manpower for Hong Kong, addressed this perception with a moving example.

People would characterize me as sometimes sentimental. I tend to have a soft spot for the disadvantaged. People would say that I sometimes would not hold the rules so strictly, but exercise more flexibility and discretion. There was a major accident on the third day of the Chinese New Year when I was Commissioner of Transport, and a bus overturned. A lady, who was the sole owner of the minibus, became comatose as a result. The license was up for renewal and under the law, the commissioner had no discretion to renew it on her behalf. I had very clear advice from the legal department, but the family depended on that license for their living. The father was also hurt, and there were three children. I asked the eldest boy to bring me a copy of the marriage and birth certificates to prove his identity, and we made the change [in the license renewal] so they were able to keep their business.

This example is all the more noteworthy in the context of the traditional Chinese bureaucracy, which is notoriously thick with rules and regulations that are to be followed to the letter.

The ability to sincerely identify with other people was seen by many of the leaders as a strong social relationship asset. Richard Bissen remarked on the importance of this skill.

When I look across at a jury, they are just like my family . . . like my relatives. So I know what they want to hear. I know how to talk to them. I can think like the criminal too. I know what it's like to run around and be a rascal too. Culturally, I could not hold myself above or apart. I was trained to be very respectful and give deference to adults. I've been there—had the lowliest of the low jobs, I can think like them. . . . I can get into someone else's skin.

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TRUSTWORTHY

Trustworthiness was strongly advocated by the 36 interviewed leaders. True to their commitment to humbly serve others in pursuit of a compelling purpose, they were both respectful and empathetic in their interactions with people. They also worked hard to build trust in their organizations.

“My word is my bond. If you don’t have trust and integrity, you cannot lead.”

—*John Hood*

Ian Fox did not equivocate on this matter: “I’m always honest and open. It’s vital that staff has faith in leadership.” Richard

Bissen let his colleagues know “that life isn’t fair, but I am. If they feel that they have gotten slighted, they can come to me and I will be fair. I don’t play favorites.” Mandy Macleod echoed a similar sentiment in stating, “I treat people fairly and equally; there are no favorites here.” As Gabor Halmi explained, however, exercising this trait sometimes comes with a price.

The prior president had kept special funds for discretionary use, not reviewed by the board. I abolished the special money. This wasn’t easy, due to special cases that do arise. But I think it is important that no special treatment or favors are given. The past recipients were not happy.

Several of the interviewed leaders also observed that authenticity is integral to trustworthiness. Julianne Lowe related that “you have to be genuine [because] everyone recognizes a phony. . . . I used to tell my sons that everyone loves flattery, but it has got to be real.” That people would trust a leader and confide in them was similarly important. Boon Yoon Chiang commented on this in relation to his efforts to build a trusting environment.

I think they trust me. They feel that I can weigh whatever they bring to me and look at it objectively. If it is the right thing, they know that I’ll come back to them and say, “This is the right thing to do, and you should be doing it.” If it is not, I think they know that I would come back to them and give a proper explanation as to why it isn’t the right thing to do. That trust must be there; otherwise, you will dampen their spirit.

Chet Bradley described how he worked to build trust in the early stages of a developing relationship.

I usually tell people, if they want to listen, quite a bit about me. I reveal myself to you and if you haven’t met with me before, I hope to get information back about you. From there, I try to carve that personal relationship into some professional role that will help us act on what needs to be done to achieve our goal.

Greenleaf (1996) observed that the servant leader’s role is to leave others more empowered and otherwise better off than when the leader first encountered

them. Many of the interviewed leaders observed that the building of trusting relationships over time communicated authentic belief in the positive potential of others. As Bob Knight observed, however, trust takes time to build and can be withdrawn in a second.

You have to build trust over time. [But] like a rubber band that you wind tighter and tighter by what you say and what you do, it can be unwound in a day. And then it is very hard to rebuild.

Without such characteristic commitment to building and sustaining trust, any leadership influence of consequence is doubtful. Helen Clark wasted few words in describing the bottom line of why a servant leader needs to continually work on a trusting relationship: “Trust can be withdrawn. . . . I serve at the will of the people.”

Passionate

Humble servants that they professed to be, the 36 leaders nevertheless described themselves as characteristically very aware of and committed to their passions. They were always focusing themselves and those they served in a straightforward manner on important matters that warranted meaningful attention. They were also both tough and vulnerable in their championing of compelling purpose.

“I have a core passion for my mission.”

—John Hood

The passionate fervor the leaders felt for their life callings was evident across all 36 interviews. Frank Lukasavitz described his calling this way: “I consider teaching not a job, but a privilege.” All the leaders spoke with great emotion about what they did and why they did it. CJ Nickerson, for example, was so passionate about the creation of a new foundation for promoting health education for children that he made sure no personal profit came to him.

I didn’t want to cause people not to trust my work, not to trust the program, which ultimately was good for kids. I wanted to insure that [the initial program] would reach the market because it was of such high quality.

Likewise, Mechai Viraviadya decided not to take any salary from the Population Development Association (PDA) that he leads. He chose instead to live modestly off a slice of his inheritance, one third of which he also gave to the PDA.

The heartfelt passions the leaders shared were obviously aligned to beliefs within their core value system. Fanny Law articulated such deeply held beliefs:

I believe that everyone is born with the motivation to learn. Every child is born with the curiosity to learn and explore. Every child has the ability to

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learn, but they may move at different paces, and everyone has the right and deserves the opportunity learn. So these are the three fundamental principles that underlie the philosophy of the entire education reform in Hong Kong. We want to build a more inclusive, more equitable system, [one that] goes against the grain of the traditional Chinese culture.

Fanny's case was similar to the experiences of the other interviewed leaders, in that her orientation to a passionate value position sustained her through many tough challenges.

Several interviewed leaders commented on the benefits of revealing their passion to others. Richard Bissen described a frequent reaction that he would get from jurors of his trial work.

A juror in one of my trials asked me [after the trial] if I was related to the victims. They said I acted like I was related to them. "You argue as if they were your friend." [That's why] I have never handled a case that I don't believe in.

Passion was often described by the 36 leaders as emerging from compelling purpose. As Christine Rodriguez explained, "I am passionate about the education focus of our philanthropy. My only regret is that I can't do more. I really enjoy what I am doing." Michael Barber was also aware of a strong value connection to passion.

I've talked about my obsession with work and my commitment to my passion. It's not just about systems design. The thing that makes me driven is making a difference for the people in the community. If it wasn't about real change on the ground, I wouldn't do the things I do.

As was the case in their prior reflections about elements within their affinity for humility, the interviewed leaders also described several traits that served their passionate character. They spoke in particular about the traits of being *focused*, *straightforward*, and *tough*.

FOCUSED

The interviewed leaders observed that they were continuously focused by their sense of values and purpose as they went about their daily business or planned for the future.

"Values are the core of the organization and become the touchstone for decision making."

—Beth Stevenson

Many of the leaders described how they used their core values as a touchstone for focusing their leadership efforts. As Christine Rodriguez noted, the values formed in childhood provide a foundation for the way one sees oneself as a leader.

My parents were spiritual leaders for me and of high moral character. The qualities I have and the beliefs that I hold are very well grounded in what I learned from them.

While talking about her values related to her commitment to the at-risk student population she served, Jeanne Dukes observed:

You have to believe that the kids will survive . . . that life is really hard, but they will survive and are salvageable. If you believe that they are, you will treat them that way. You have to believe that they are smart enough to catch on, which they are. You have to believe in the value and quality of the kids. . . . Even though they might look ragged and might talk ragged and have been raised by wolves, the next generation will be better because of what we are doing. You have to believe in the worth of our cause, of the worth of these kids.

Another educator, Gary Rasmussen, also felt strongly about how his value orientation toward students provided direction for his decision making. "I have a nonnegotiable commitment to kids, above all else."

In seeing themselves as the keeper of a value vision, these leaders understood their responsibility to be one of staying the course and not getting pulled off line by the many distractions that came their way. Rod Chamberlain observed:

I am a steward for this organization, and I have a responsibility to achieve those goals. I have to use my discernment and check it out to be sure that I am not off the wall, but I will then follow through day to day.

Beth Stevenson was very aware of the challenge of staying centered amid the flood of leadership tasks.

I never lose sight of what I am trying to accomplish. There is always so much going on and so many distractions. For me, success is a calling, and it is not just the mission, but how you get there. The core values are the touchstone, and we use them as a continuous yardstick. Ultimately, I look inside. Can I live with myself? Am I ethically accomplishing my core purpose?

To avoid becoming distracted by the inevitable myriad activities within daily schedules, Roger Harmon suggested that a leader necessarily had to take in the whole picture.

One has to pay attention to self, individuals, and the complexity of the situation, from the foreground to the background, from the immediate to the broader context. It involves not just trying to get somewhere by assisting other people, but seeing what it is that I can contribute as well.

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Some of the leaders prescribed specific strategies for maintaining focus on what is important in the midst of distraction and competing tasks. Gary Rasmussen, for example, adopted a process to help him and his organization focus their efforts.

We use total quality management principles around a problem. Once we've accomplished our goals, we try to maintain the progress and not let it slip; then we'll move on to the next challenge.

In order to sustain focus, Gary continued,

We really have to keep it in the forefront. It has to be the top [leadership] modeling what we do, as well as reinforcing and following up; otherwise, it will die a slow death.

Beth Stevenson described a similar affinity to process as a means to focus.

I try to be centered, because there is always so much going on and so many distractions. If you can distill things down to clear steps, you avoid fragmentation. Creating a good process is critical in order to allow for ambiguity, but keeping the focus [is also critical] so those things keep moving.

Leotis Watson used another approach to maintaining focus, that of modeling it for others.

Everyone knows Leotis because they know that I respect everyone and lead by example. To me, the key is consistency. They see it and hear it day in and day out. I am trying to perfect a way in myself that through performance on a consistent basis, they see this guy is doing the same thing every day in every way.

Mandy Macleod concurred with such need for action that was aligned to purpose: "You not only have to be visionary, but you have to be seen doing it."

STRAIGHTFORWARD

Clarity and passion about core values formed early in life promotes leadership that is straightforward and open in character. Fanny Law traced such character in herself to her family's influence.

"I'm always honest and open. It's vital that staff has faith in leadership."

—*Ian Fox*

My father is a fairly straightforward person. He has this character with this company. . . . He is seen as a no-nonsense manager. As a civil servant, I also am much more [inclined toward] straight talk. So I think I inherited this from my father.

Similarly, Christine Rodriguez noted the genesis of such a trait.

The value for honesty came from my parents. They have always instilled that in us. I don't want to sound like I'm way up there, but for the most part, I do carry on my life with honesty and candor.

Kuami Pianim and Patrick Sayne talked about the importance of honesty in creating a psychologically safe environment for others. Kuami noted the value orientation to honesty he received from his grandmother.

She taught us to be honest and don't tell a lie. When you tell a lie, you have to remember it. When you speak the truth, you don't need to remember it because it is a part of you.

Patrick applied the same value to his leadership role.

You have to be authentic and honest. No game playing. You can't let people get the impression that they are being handled or manipulated. That's where the honesty comes in. There is no [apparent] risk in saying it, but I'm not going to say I will consider something when I mean no. That will also kill open discourse as fast as any type of humiliation.

Richard Bissen described his aversion to game playing as well and talked about the fact that he could detect it because at one time, he played those games himself.

I've become a performer, but I used to be a heckler. I know when someone is playing with me and I say, "Never bullshit a bullshitter."

Whether eloquent or pragmatic, the message from the interviewed leaders was consistent: If people are to trust leaders, they must perceive them as passionately honest and forthright. When manipulation and game playing are discouraged, people will know where they stand and feel free to contribute their opinions and ideas openly.

One of the ways in which the leaders invited straightforward interactions was to open themselves up to others. Roger Harmon described it this way:

I think you have to be willing to be vulnerable with people and let them have a pretty good insight into what I am seeing as the dynamics of the situation. I don't hold the cards very close to my vest. I get a lot of advice, and share my own experience, but always in relation to the goals of the organization.

Although he was close to the main seat of governmental power in Great Britain, Michael Barber was similarly willing to expose his vulnerability.

I spend a lot of time here with the staff, but I also spend a lot of time on Downing Street. About 2 weeks ago, I was worrying about a number of things,

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and I did what all leadership books tell you not to do, which is just share a set of worries with the team without having any resolution. So on that occasion, I shared with them, and we've now been through it, and we've sort of come to a resolution and [Prime Minister] Blair's on board for what I want to do for the next phase. In one way, that was bad leadership, but I think it helped to convey a message on how you involve people in [the process].

As John Hood described it, moreover, being straightforward and open with others also means that one has to follow that path in dealing with the consequences.

I recently showed anger in a meeting and spent the morning going around and apologizing to all present. I am always prepared to learn from my mistakes and genuinely apologize for them.

It appeared, then, that the leaders sought to balance straightforward approachability and openness with an unwavering focus on the accomplishment of purpose. Fanny Law's observation captured that balancing act.

I constantly have to remind myself to see things from the other side. I invite the other side from all of my colleagues—I invite them to speak the truth to me. Sometimes, [however,] people will find the soft options. I always tell my colleagues that we must focus our attentions on the interests of the students.

TOUGH

Passionately focused and straightforward, the 36 leaders also opined about the importance of maintaining an internal toughness and resilience.

"What makes a successful organization is sticking to a few key values."

—Patrick Sayne

Fanny Law elaborated on balancing a straightforward and open relationship with associates with a tough stance on fundamental issues.

I go out very often to meet frontline educators. I go to schools every week at 7:30 in the morning. It keeps me in touch with reality. In fact, I am the person who has mixed reputations. People say I am very approachable, that I listen. But I can also be a taskmaster and can, at times, be stern in dealing with staff and business associates.

Many of the leaders expressed the need to maintain some emotional distance at the same time they were cultivating strong open relationships. Julianne Lowe called it putting on the shop face.

I grew up in a shop. My parents had a grocery store. . . . We were dealing with people and we could be having a fight out back and then the bell would ring, and we would rush up with big smiles on our faces and say, "Good morning how can I help you?" I learned to cover my inner emotions. You could be angry inside and then put on your shop face.

Relating this attribute to her current work, Julianne further noted:

You do toughen up in this job or you could lose your faith in mankind. You can't get too personally involved. If you get too close or too friendly, they start to see you as the same as them with the same sort of faults and then they stop trusting your leadership and start doubting you. Others will resent it as well if you get too close.

Mandy Macleod concurred with that perspective in talking about learning the skill of appearing calm when emotions are broiling under the surface.

I am even tempered on the surface. I think it is very much something you have to be when you deal with people. They need to see calmness; they don't want to see you losing your temper. They don't want to see you dissolving into tears, and if you have to do these things, you do it in private. I think the face of an administrator can oftentimes be very different from what is really on the inside.

Some might judge such self-management of emotions to be inauthentic, yet John Hood was firm on the need for such toughness.

You have to do it. I mean you could call that disingenuous, but it is not intended to be. It is done in one's interpretation of the best interest of the organization at that point in time.

Patrick Sayne described learning a similar lesson.

I've learned not to let my hot button get pushed. There is a certain kind of play-acting in leadership. You have to hide it when you are angry. But you have to put it in perspective. I tell people when they get upset, "You need to understand that as long as school opens in the morning and there is a teacher to meet those students . . . not a hell of a lot can happen that is really bad." In the scheme of things, that's what is really important. You figure out that the sun is going to rise in the east no matter what happens. You don't want to give up, but you want to adopt an attitude that there is always another day.

A dramatic example of leadership toughness in the face of a challenge to core values came from Leotis Watson, who, as a head concierge, was always in the public eye.

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One guest got irate about some tickets that she thought were too expensive. I said I would call and try to get a reduction on price. At one point in the heated exchange she said, "Well isn't that just like a nigger." The other guests watched for my reaction. I thought, "That may be how you feel, but it can't harm me." I refuse to let anybody or anything turn that attitude around. If anything, I am going to turn them around. Whenever you are working, you're on stage. It is up to each one of us to make it happen.

The interviewed leaders often observed that asserting one's beliefs could advance one's purpose, but that it also took courage to do so. Brenda Schoonover recalled instances when being a woman in a leadership position put her at a disadvantage.

I had to fight not only for housing [in a posting in Tanzania] but also for an equal portfolio [work assignment] that the men there had. I learned to approach it with a positive attitude and assume that everybody was up front. So I spoke out in a firm, calm manner. I think if I had gotten hysterical, they probably would've put me on the next plane out of there.

The leaders also commented on the importance of managing personal stress to the advantage of their leadership influence on their organizations. Bob Knight, for example, described how he learned to adopt a tough approach to managing his own emotions in order to reduce stress on himself and others.

I am part German and [part] Irish. When I was very young, things could get me upset. I learned to understand what stress is all about. It's all inside. The experience is what is it, but it's how you interpret it. You have to control it. In the end, you have to be able to let it slide. It took me several years to hold it in and not let it blow. When I watched other leaders blow up, they looked like fools and were hurting themselves and losing respect.

Contemplative

The 36 leaders collectively portrayed themselves as humble servants who were passionately committed to achieving compelling purpose. They also described

"Effective [organizations] have something that draws them together, to discuss, debate, and challenge, and the vision develops."

—*Ian Fox*

themselves as characteristically contemplative about purpose and how best to achieve it. They were, in a word, thinkers. It was their manner to ponder what was necessary and possible to do. They were given to reflective analysis of the way things were, as well as what might be. Furthermore, the reflections of the interviewed leaders presented such musings as natural and

necessary to their decision-making and problem-solving responsibilities. As Frank Lukasavitz put it, "I have always been a rebel. I question everything." Such contemplative character was most evident in the leaders' accounts of their propensity to be visionary and meditative in performing their leadership roles.

VISIONARY

The importance of formulating an orienting organizational vision is ubiquitous in the leadership literature (Bass, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Sashkin, 2003). The interviewed leaders certainly had no argument with that time-honored perspective. Alex Banful, for example, spoke of learning early in life about the importance of cultivating a clear vision of the future.

"Leaders must know the way,
show the way, and go the way."

—Mandy Macleod

My father used to say that he was building our houses in his head, as he planned for our future. That's what I find myself saying now, take the house in your head and build it in the way you want. I have built this organization from 1 1/2 people to the 82 we employ now. I can see the long haul.

John Hood concurred that the cultivation of a common vision was an essential and ongoing leadership responsibility.

I think anyone in an organizational leadership position has to have an eye over the horizon, as well as an eye immediately on the land in front. One has to be constantly thinking about where the world is going, how the university world is developing internationally, what are the things we need to be thinking about as an institution to ensure that we remain in the upper league, what are the directions we need to be pursuing, and then use the organizational process to test and evolve it.

Patrick Sayne observed that envisioning the future was a unique responsibility of leadership: "I think a manager is someone who provides organization, but a leader provides vision." Gabor Halmai spoke of the importance of leadership attention to the big picture of what the organization was about and how it would conduct its business. When he assumed his leadership role with a foundation, he was faced with redefining the mission and streamlining the organization to better serve that mission.

I think the most important thing is to find out the mission and the tools to fulfill it. I came here to change the functioning of the organization, to concentrate on some really important things. We need to concentrate on policy issues and work on cultural issues. We [the board and I] decide on the most important guidelines, and then there are no problems.

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Rod Chamberlain reflected about the indigenous value for envisioning the future, as he described the Hawaiian custom of investing for future generations.

One of the strengths of the Hawaiian culture is the *ali'i*, or the chiefs, and how they look to the future. In fact, for them, the culture was to look ahead not one generation, not two, but seven generations into the future. They would judge a decision of an *ali'i* based on what would happen seven generations or 140 years from now. If you look around, that is what has happened here. This is the first permanent K–12 campus since the original on Oahu in 1877 . . . so we think this a part of that original vision that Bernice Polahi Bishop had for Kamehameha schools and for Hawaii. This belief in planning for future generations is held to be important not only in the Hawaiian culture, but in many other indigenous cultures as well, and has had a profound effect on the development of many leaders.

On a national political level, Helen Clark described the essentials of an influential vision: “You must believe in the mission yourself and have ideas and values that people can identify with.” Helen further noted the importance of keeping the vision in the forefront. “You have to create the agenda and keep moving forward. If you’re moving, you’re a very hard target. I look forward, never back.”

The interviewed leaders also perceived a need to align vision with values. To that end, they most often connected their personal goals and sense of purpose to their vision for their organization. Patrick Sayne illustrated this orientation.

My central core is honesty, directness, and integrity. Our job is to serve the kids. Anything outside of that is peripheral. You can lead through deceit and manipulation, but that is not leading—it’s controlling. Even with good values you can lose your position, but with the negative ones you absolutely will.

Ian Fox thought the concept of aligning values and vision to be rather straightforward.

I don’t think it’s too difficult really; it’s just reminding occasionally, if we have a difficult decision to make, then maybe we go back to that core belief [that] it’s paramount that the focus is on students first.

Developing a sense of coherence between values and vision and practice was a theme that often emerged within the interviews. Michael Barber, for example, described the effect of writing about his vision.

I wrote a book called *The Learning Game* about my vision of how the education system should be. I still draw from it. . . . When you write your vision down, you have to deal with that. It brings coherence to the way you approach things. That was absolutely seminal for me.

Along this line, several leaders commented on the necessity of stepping back and seeing the organization as a whole, rather than getting tied up in the day-to-day minutia. Mechai Viraviadya, for example, observed that he worked to see the whole and the parts simultaneously by planning systemically and operating pragmatically. He further commented that “refusing to accept defeat forces you to look at the whole.” Beth Stevenson had yet another take on building community and connecting everyday practice to values and vision within an organization.

I always try to work more holistically and feel successful when I have helped somebody do something to broaden their horizons or build their skills. I keep asking myself, “What can I do to help to make a person’s life easier and the organization work better?” I try to avoid fragmentation. People need to see the whole so they have a sense of belonging and sense of team. We create a sense of community when we see ourselves within the big picture. We create a comfort level when what we do is aligned with our values.

Suffice it to say, the interviewed leaders believed in the necessity and power of vision. Mandy Macleod succinctly captured the essence of their sentiments.

You have to have a vision. You have to be able to lead to the vision. And you have to show the people how to come along with you. Leaders must know the way, show the way, and go the way.

MEDITATIVE

Beyond their contemplative visioning of ultimate destinations, the interviewed leaders also mentally massaged the details of how to get there. From the reflections they shared, it was not that they would stop and think things over every great once in a while; rather, they were almost in a continuous meditative state where they habitually thought things through either on the run or in structured opportunities for reflection. Both intuitively and from their experience, they had developed a strong value for thinking about what they were doing before, during, and after doing it.

“I’m always trying to figure out how to do something better. I keep asking myself what I can do to help make a person’s life easier and the organization work better.”

—Beth Stevenson

Nola Hambleton, for example, observed that she learned about the value of prior reflection from early life experiences with doing things first and asking questions later. Now more experienced and wiser, she commented, “I now see the end before moving forward.” Rod Chamberlain spoke of a mentor’s

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influence on his acquiring a deeper appreciation for a meditative approach to leadership performance.

One of my mentors is a Quaker, and he refined my thinking about how to help others. The Quaker process of clarification is very affirming and deeply reflective.

Many of the leaders structured time and space for meditating (i.e., thinking deeply) about multiple issues associated with their leadership responsibilities and interests. Ross Gilbert viewed such reflection as necessary to his daily survival.

I sit over there [pointing to a spot in his office]. I purposefully change my space in the office and sit and reflect. Sometimes I read and sometimes I write in my diary on the day's activities. I think about them and what I am going to do and how I'm going to carry through my basic principles of action during the day.

Highly visible leaders like Helen Clark and John Hood were clear about the need to take the time to think through their agendas. Helen shared that "I take a month in the summer to read, organize, and plan the PM statement in the fall." Likewise, John had learned to annually schedule a concentrated time for thinking things through.

I generally spend the summer vacation thinking very long and hard. In each of the three years I've done that now, the action plan that comes out the other end is very close to the agenda that I've thought through while on leave.

Several of the leaders talked about often experiencing external pressures to rush to judgment—and their determination not to let that happen. Mandy Macleod described her resistance strategy.

I need to feel sure that I've come up with the best solution because I'm not comfortable with failure. I like to think that what I'm aiming at is going to be successful because I've given it enough thought to make it as successful as possible. Often I say, "I will get back to you." If it's pressing, "I'll get back to you in a half hour."

Helen Clark, given the magnitude of her government responsibilities, was very adamant about adequately thinking through an issue. "I refuse to make judgments under pressure. I like to establish my own rhythm in my work and grab the timetable."

And understandably, the interviewees, like all leaders who are committed to achieving a meaningful purpose, were adverse to failure. This did not mean,

however, that they did not view mistakes and missteps as learning opportunities. CJ Nickerson, for example, noted that he had developed a natural tendency to process the “what” and “how” of things gone wrong.

I learn a lot of different ways, but I try to learn from my mistakes. There is self-analysis. . . . Right after a mistake, I may be in a clean-up mode, but then I'll find myself pulling weeds in the garden thinking about it. These things tend to stay with me.

Lessons Learned

When asked to describe defining qualities of their leadership performance, these 36 leaders observed the importance of leadership character. Their collective reflections suggest that their leadership performance was necessarily in character because it emanated from their core values. How they performed was prefaced by who they were as defined by what they believed and held to be most important.

In describing attributes of their leadership character, the interviewed leaders shared the essence of *who* they perceived themselves to be. In their minds, the way they saw themselves and how others saw them was a significant element of how they performed to influence others toward the achievement of goals.

The prominent perceptions of leadership performance shared by this particular group of leaders to this point, then, appear to be the following:

1. Leadership performance emanates from force of character aligned to values.
2. Leadership benefits from performance that is humble, passionate, and contemplative in character.

Regarding the leaders' perception that leadership performance emanates from character aligned to values, it is a difficult position to argue against. First and foremost, how the 36 leaders saw it is how they saw it. It was their perception. That they so strongly and collectively observed the importance of such alignment, however, warrants our further attention. This is a particularly important observation to the degree that it suggests how coherent leadership, that is, leadership defined by natural and logical relationships between essential elements, evolves (see Figure 5.1).

The leaders' awareness of a force of character within their leadership performance is encouraging to the current resurgence of leadership trait research (Lowe & Gardner, 2000). As to their collective endorsement of particular leadership character traits, it obviously falls once more into the province of

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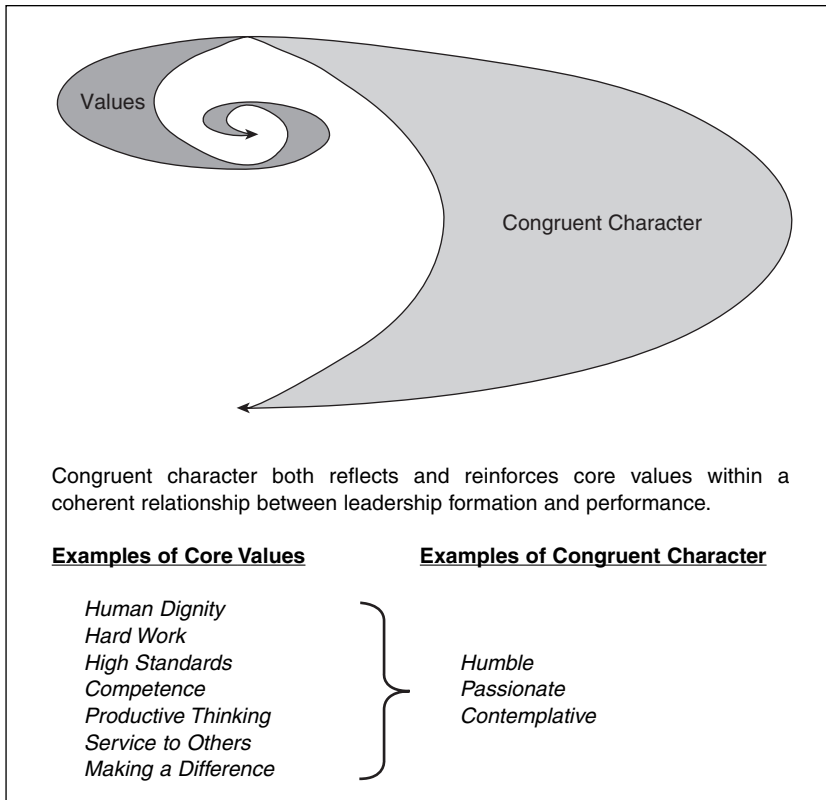


Figure 5.1 Coherent Leadership Is Extended and Reinforced by Congruent Character

personal experience and perception. Again, however, the prominence of the character traits of humility, passion, and contemplation across the stories shared by these 36 leaders warrants respect for the collective wisdom offered. Furthermore, the character observations of the interviewed leaders find reinforcement in the leadership literature. Greenleaf (1996), for example, espouses the virtues of the Servant Leader, and Collins (2001) provides additional perspective of humble leadership from his description of the Level Five Leader. Regarding leaders being characteristically passionate, where is the successful leader, we might ask, who is not passionate about his or her purpose? That is, if you think of a leader of historical stature, they were passionate about their cause, right? Fullan (2003) and Leider (1997) speak to the importance of a strong orientation to compelling purpose. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) add their insights about the emotional dynamic behind Primal

Leadership. In the matter of contemplation, who is going to advocate for leaders who don't think about what they are doing or why or how they are doing it? But should the position need support, Covey (1989), Perkins (1995), and Gardner (1995) describe the qualities and benefits of good thinking habits.

Further Conversation

With the previously mentioned insights in mind, we move on, in Chapter 6, to further reflection about leadership performance—reflections that describe how leadership performance was acted out across prominent fields of behavior. Before we do so, however, you are invited to engage in Exercises 5.1 and 5.2.

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EXERCISE 5.1 Further Conversation: Force of Character

With reference to your prior reflection in Further Conversation Exercise 2.1:

- A. What are the core values that orient your approach to life and leadership?
- B. What character traits define how you see yourself as a leader?
- C. What character traits define how others see you as a leader?
- D. How are your leadership character traits congruent with your core values?

EXERCISE 5.2

- A. Why might congruency between leadership values and character matter?
- B. Why might humility be a valuable force of character in leadership performance?
- C. Why might passion be a valuable force of character in leadership performance?
- D. Why might contemplation be a valuable force of character in leadership performance?
- E. What is the single most important character trait of an effective leader? Why?