

Building Business Character – By Stuart Mackenzie.

In a challenging business environment, an organisation's success depends on the old-fashioned notion of character. Why? Because real character is the foundation of an organisation's integrity, resilience and distinctiveness.

In fact, I believe that character is a major factor in producing sustained organisational performance and a prerequisite for successful leadership.

"What you are shouts so loudly in my ears, I cannot hear what you say".

Ralph Waldo Emerson

When I took my first tentative steps into leadership, it was something of a shock. It was entirely different from the sunny picture I confidently held of what it meant to run things.

It was like awakening in an unfamiliar sea, feeling a little lost: the oceanic unpredictability of the market; the relentless, buffeting waves of people issues; the dizzying complexities of captaincy.

And beneath the surface the internal panic and drowning self-doubt that lurks in the deep. One must find a way of steering a resolute course, making brave choices, staying authentic. This is often the birthplace of character. It is rarely an easy birth.

At Maynard Leigh, we are exploring what designates character in people and how this informs leadership. Here we share some of our initial conclusions and offer some clarity about how to build organisational character.

ARISING FROM THE DEPTHS

The development of character occurs when a person grows more comfortable in their own skin. It happens when practicing self-discipline, and developing a strong set of values.

As character expands, it also begins to provide buoyancy. Leaders who develop character seem more likely to gain the self-awareness that enables them to tame their inner demons and attain the maturity that good leadership demands. With the buoyancy, they seem able to rise above limited self-interest and self-preservation.

They become more predisposed to act consistently in the best interests of their people and their organization.

THE FOUNDATION OF CHARACTER

Like Trust, or Engagement, Character is potentially a fuzzy concept. To make it more useful we need to narrow it down. Therefore, we focus on three elements of character: integrity, resilience and distinctiveness.

Integrity stems from a consistency of actions, values, and principles. Putting it simply people say what they mean and mean what they say. It denotes an honesty and truthfulness in one's behaviour. Integrity arises from an inner sense of "wholeness".

Resilience on the other hand, is about fortitude and robustness. Like a tree that bends with the wind but does not break an individual displays resilience when persistently pursuing their vision. It describes their ability to bounce back from disappointments and to be enduringly flexible in the face of changing realities.

Distinctiveness is the leader's willingness to stand up for something, to put their head above the parapet and make a noticeable impact. It has its roots in our capacity to have an authentic and distinctive voice in the world.

All three of these essential leadership capabilities, integrity, resilience and distinctiveness are learnable and not confined to those who "were born to lead."

REINFORCING THE ORGANISATION

All these aspects of Character, though normally applied to individuals equally apply to organisations.

We would argue that the concept of "character" can positively affect an organisation's ability to navigate the turbulent ocean of 21st century business, making strong choices and acting with conviction. In any enterprise the senior leader's behaviours and actions set the cultural climate for all. The values that senior managers exhibit directly influence the character of the company, and therefore its reputation.

*"If we keep treating our most important values,
as meaningless relics, that's exactly what they'll become".*

Michael Josephson

In the search for defining an organisation's character, we find there are considerable gains from articulating and modelling values. What weakens company character is when leaders proclaim one thing and do another. Clients and employees can gauge the degree of alignment between what an organisation says is important and the reality of how its leaders behave. In working with executive teams we seek to raise their awareness of how much they live the values, and importantly where they see gaps in the behaviour.

Just as an individual's character and character flaws are a composite of their recurring behaviours and habits, so the character of an organisation is an amalgam of how the top team act, individually and collectively. An organisation's reputation is a major asset, or a dangerous liability. And reputation, what people think of the company, rests on the strength of the character.

*"Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow.
The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."*

Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's Own Stories
16th president of US (1809 - 1865)