

# PERSPECTIVES ON CHARACTER AND LEADERSHIP

DAVID V. DAY  
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

No less a leadership expert than General Norman Schwarzkopf has noted that leaders are more likely to fail because of a lack of character than a lack of competence (Mason, 1992). In writing about shortcomings in executive selection, George Hollenbeck (2008) argued recently that the desired approach to selecting organizational leaders should focus first on issues of individual character and then on leader competence and relevant competencies (in that order). In line with Gen. Schwarzkopf's observations, Hollenbeck attributes a good deal of the "widespread executive failure" (p. 134) to selection approaches that have focused on competencies and competence with little regard to leader character.

This raises the obvious question that if character is so important for leadership then why is there not more attention given to it in the scholarly and practical arenas? A secondary question is "what are some possible ways to better emphasize the importance of developing and selecting leaders of character?" In addressing these questions a good place to begin is with a definition of leader character. Bass (2008) defines the character of a leader as involving "ethical and moral beliefs, intentions, and behavior" (p. 219). From this

definition it is apparent that much of the onus with regard to character is on the individual leader, especially in terms of internalized character traits (e.g., Platonic virtues of honesty, justice, courage, among others).

Kohlberg (1981, 1984) was among the first in the modern era (with all due respect to Plato) to focus on the topic of moral development as a rightful domain of scholarly theory and research. His groundbreaking scholarship has served as the foundation for others interested in the application of moral development to understanding ethical decision-making in general (Rest, 1979; Reynolds, 2006) as well as more specific issues associated with individual ethical decision making in organizational contexts (Jones, 1991; Treviño, 1986). More recently, I have proposed with colleagues that moral development must be an inherent part of the leader development process because (a) nearly every decision a leader makes has ethical implications, (b) leaders serve as role models and are the focus of identification and emulation by followers, and (c) leaders shape the ethical and moral climate of their respective units (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). All of these approaches put forward a number of

Dr. David Day is currently the Woodside Professor of Leadership and Management at the University of Western Australia Business School. He has over 60 publications on the topics of leadership and leadership development in such premier journals as *Leadership Quarterly*, *Personnel Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Psychology* (serves as an Associate Editor), *Academy of Management Journal*, and the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.

---

leader-centric perspectives on character and its development. What has received comparatively little attention is the role of the follower in defining the character of a leader.

It was through the tutelage and mentoring of Bob Lord that I first came to appreciate the role of the follower in shaping leadership processes. The theoretical and empirical work of Lord and colleagues has demonstrated the importance of leadership perceptions (e.g., Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Lord & Maher, 1991). In many ways, followers determine through their perceptual and categorization processes which individuals are seen as “leader-like.” This is a relevant concern because it is followers who make leaders successful by producing the desirable effects that are generally attributed to their leaders (Lord & Brown, 2004). In short, if you do not perceive someone as a leader then you are unlikely to allow that individual to influence you and influence is often considered to be essential to effective leadership. In similar ways, the notion of leader integrity is something that is defined by followers through interactions with their leaders and potential leaders.

Bass (2008) noted that “the virtue of integrity is at the core of character and ethical leadership” (p. 222). Integrity is typically conceptualized in terms of leaders keeping their promises, doing what they say they will do, and following up on

their commitments. A variant of this view of leader integrity is behavioral integrity, which is an ascribed trait in which followers perceive a pattern of alignment between someone’s words and his or her deeds (Simons, 2002). Looking at it a different way, behavioral integrity can be considered the opposite of hypocrisy when the latter is defined as the inconsistency between talk and action. These perceptions and attributions are made as a result of followers’ experience and history with their leaders. In this way, behavioral integrity is retrospective in nature whereas the related concept of credibility is prospective. Similar to the related construct of trust, credibility is forward looking and is built on a foundation of behavioral integrity from what has occurred in the past.

Although research on behavioral integrity is only just beginning to emerge (e.g., Simons, Friedman, Liu, & McClean Parks, 2007), it offers a potentially valuable addition to theory and research on leader character and integrity. In particular, this follower-centric approach to character emphasizes that behavioral integrity is subjective in nature (which makes it especially difficult to manage), is ascribed as a trait to leaders by followers, is attributed at multiple levels (individual and groups of individuals), and contains “an asymmetry between the ease of confirming...and violating it” (Simons, 2002, p. 25). The latter point refers to something that has been observed about trust – that is, it is slow to build but can disappear quickly. As

---

attributed to Benjamin Franklin, “It takes many good deeds to build a reputation and only one bad one to lose it.”

This raises the interesting question of whether behavioral integrity is really about character at all. It has been said that someone’s reputation is what other people think of him (or her) but character is what (s)he really is (Anonymous). The issue becomes how to know what people “really are” apart from their words and deeds, and the alignment between the two. This could be why character is rarely explicitly considered in most leader development programs and initiatives. Nonetheless, attempting to understand it from others’ perspectives helps to bring home the point that whether you call it character, reputation, or something else it is at least partly constructed by others in the interpersonal environment. Others’ perceptions matter and they matter a lot in leadership. From recent theory and research on behavioral integrity, it seems that others’ perceptions matter as well in the construction, maintenance, and management of leader character. As initiatives move forward at the United States Air Force Academy in terms of further integrating character development with leadership development, it would also be wise to keep the critical role and perceptions of followers in focus as integral components of what it means to be a leader of character.

An overarching theme of this brief essay is that there are multiple perspectives on character. Put

somewhat differently, in the leadership domain there will always be various stakeholders and a difficult task for any leader involves managing his/her own behavior in ways that maximize behavioral integrity. From a research perspective, this will involve studying character and integrity as socio-perceptual phenomena in ways similar to how Lord and colleagues have done in the leadership domain.

This does not mean that character exists only in the eye of the beholder; however, followers are important leadership stakeholders. Yet followers are not always a homogenous stakeholder group as research in areas such as leader-member exchange (LMX) theory attest. Research on LMX (see Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995 for an overview and summary) has shown that leaders develop different relationship qualities among their followers, which might contribute to inconsistencies in terms of how a leader is perceived. Thus, a relevant concern involves (among other things) studying how consistently leader character or behavioral integrity is viewed across stakeholder groups. One group might see a leader as adaptable by changing strategy to reflect changing situational circumstances whereas another group may see the same action as breaking promises. These are important issues to understand because the higher a leader rises in the organizational hierarchy, the more visible the leader becomes and the more politicized the climate. Under such conditions behavioral integrity is especially difficult to

manage. It is not only a test of a leader's character but also challenging on an interpersonal level.

In closing, character is most certainly a critical issue for developing leaders and building leadership in any organization. But it is not solely an issue of what is in a leader's heart, soul, or temperament. Character is also something that is constructed by those who are affected by a leader's actions. One of the many things the USAFA Center for Character and Leadership Development can do through research, education, and training is help leaders build character and manifest behavioral integrity across multiple stakeholders and dynamic environments.



## REFERENCES

- Bass, B. M. (2008). *The Bass handbook of leadership: Theory, research, and managerial applications* (4th ed.). New York: Free Press.
- Day, D. V., Harrison, M. M., & Halpin, S. M. (2009). *An integrative approach to leader development: Connecting adult development, identity, and expertise*. New York: Routledge.
- Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. *Leadership Quarterly*, 6, 219-247.
- Hollenbeck, G. P. (2008). Executive selection -- what's right...and what's wrong. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 2, 130-143.
- Jones, T. M. (1991). Ethical decision making by individuals in organizations: An issue-contingent model. *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 366-395.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981). *The meaning and measurement of moral development*. Worcester, MA: Clark University.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral stages*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Lord, R. G., & Brown, D. J. (2004). *Leadership processes and follower self-identity*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Lord, R. G., Foti, R. J., & De Vader, C. L. (1984). A test of leadership categorization theory: Internal structure, information processing, and leadership perceptions. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 34, 343-378.
- Lord, R. G., De Vader, C. L., & Alliger, G. M. (1986). A meta-analysis of the relation between personality traits and leadership perceptions: An application of validity generalization procedures. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71, 402-409.
- Lord, R. G., & Maher, K. J. (1991). *Leadership and information processing: Linking perceptions and performance*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Mason, J. C. (1992, October). Leading the way into the 21st century. *Management Review*, 16-19.
- Rest, J. R. (1979). *Development in judging moral issues*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Reynolds, S. J. (2006). A neurocognitive model of the ethical decision-making process: Implications for study and practice. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91, 737-748.
- Simons, T. (2002). Behavioral integrity: The perceived alignment between managers' words and deeds as a research focus. *Organization Science*, 13, 18-35.
- Simons, T., Friedman, R., Liu, L. A., & McClean Parks, J. (2007). Racial differences in sensitivity to behavioral integrity: Attitudinal consequences, in-group effects, and "trickle down" among black and non-black employees. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92, 650-665.
- Treviño, L. K. (1986). Ethical decision making in organizations: A person-situation interactionist model. *Academy of Management Review*, 11, 601-617.