

FIRST-PERSON: Creating a culture of character in your company

By Tom Hill

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OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)--Leaders of businesses, nonprofits or ministries know that every current and future employee represents their organization's name (or brand) in the marketplace. Scripture declares, "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold." (Proverbs 22:1).

With tough economic times for business, highly visible ethics violations in major corporations, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act and a "flat" business world, the character of every individual, beginning with top leaders, may be the most important and challenging issue facing every organization today.

Without employees of good character, a company is at great risk. The Apostle Paul refers to this in ministry when he wrote, "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'" (1 Corinthians 15:33). No doubt a business is not a church, but just as a few bad apples can create problems in a congregation, a person of bad character can create a negative atmosphere, lower productivity and damage any good organization's reputation.



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Until now, organizations have focused on ethics training -- but the cheese has moved. As leaders we must do more than ethics training. We must address the culture of our organizations by actively encouraging good character in each employee. We must make character first. We must work to create a culture of character in our companies and organizations by learning to hire for character and by recognizing and rewarding good character. The following principles have been effectively used in our company as well as thousands of organizations of all types around the world by making character first.

TO CREATE A CULTURE OF CHARACTER, HIRE FOR CHARACTER

While there are many characteristics of a good employee -- education, experience and skills -- none is more important than character. Character encompasses many important values, including truthfulness, responsibility, initiative and dependability. Hiring for character is more important than the job skills or experience listed on a resume. An employee who is extremely skilled but without good character may steal from your organization.

As leaders of business and ministry, we want people with good character in our organizations. A person's character determines whether they will do the right thing when faced with tough decisions or ethically questionable situations. A person's character also determines how they treat their coworkers, customers, suppliers, supervisors and -- ultimately -- the organization.

HOW TO MEASURE A CANDIDATE'S CHARACTER

The national unemployment rate is hovering around 9.5 percent, meaning there are many candidates vying for

any opening in our organizations. The candidates know they are competing for limited positions and can be very creative in the way they present themselves. The questions are, "How do I sift through all the candidates and the potentially exaggerated resumes to find the best fit for our organization?" and "How do I plug character into the employment equation?" The best way is to determine how the candidate responded to difficult situations in the past. If we can review tough situations she has experienced and see how she responded, we can begin to discover her character.

Employment applications typically tend to focus on education, training and specialized skills. If we desire to hire for character, we should also be interested in truthfulness, punctuality, dependability, loyalty and contentment, as well as other character qualities. To hire for character, we must add questions that focus on and reveal character. We can then use the questions during the interview as a springboard for further discussion about character.

This is not a difficult process. For example, if we are interested in loyalty and contentment, we could ask, "Was the previous company you worked for a good company?" Or, "Was your previous employer fair regarding pay?" Chapter 17 of "Making Character First" gives additional insights on hiring for character. Appendix B lists sample questions to help an organization start hiring for character.

Can a person's complete character be revealed in the employment interview process? No. But if we ask the right questions and listen carefully to the answers, we can get a good glimpse of his or her character. Taking an alternative approach to a traditional interview can identify the best candidates among the crowd.

In order to create an organization with a culture of character and employees known for their character, a business must hire for character. There is no other way, and there are no shortcuts.

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