

## **Transforming Leadership: Does Character Count?**

“In a president, character is everything. A president doesn’t have to be brilliant...He doesn’t have to be clever; you can hire clever. White Houses are always full of quick-witted people with ready advice on how to flip a senator or implement a strategy...But you can’t buy courage and decency; you can’t rent a strong moral sense. A president must bring those things with him.” Peggy Noonan, Speechwriter for Ronald Reagan<sup>i</sup>

There are four key factors that make up a great team. I have coined an acronym TEAM to denote these 4 factors:

**T**ransforming Leadership  
**E**nhancing Relationships  
**A**ligning Roles and Responsibilities  
**M**anaging Systems and Processes

The first factor is **Transforming Leadership**. A leader is marked by three main components: Character, Competence, and Commitment. In this article, I would like to address the issue of Character.

Why has character fallen on the sideline? How has the issue of character in leadership been eroded?

## **Fascination With Evil**

We are inescapably drawn to leaders who reach success beyond conventional or moral channels to leaders whose characters are flawed by evil: Caligula, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler. As Os Guinness, a visiting Fellow at Brookings Institute, writes, “So, we do not seem dismayed by evil heroes. Indeed, we have a streak of fascination for our fellow creatures with the audacity to transgress.”<sup>ii</sup>

## **Bottom Line Comes First**

Another argument against leadership without character is “as long as they deliver the results, character does not matter.” This is condoned and sometimes, applauded in the name of “openness” and “permissiveness”. So, we applaud Mike Tyson’s self-profession as “the baddest man on the planet.” And we buy into Gordon Gekko’s philosophy as portrayed in the movie Wall Street that “Greed is good.” Mike Tyson was estimated to have earned US\$400 million in his boxing career so far.

## **Victim Of Liberalism**

As Guinness has also pointed out most poignantly, “Character has become the victim of modern liberalism’s double emphasis on secularity and self-interest.” If I may add a third

emphasis: sex. Plow through a popular magazine like HER World, how many articles can you find written about the moral character of spouses? None. Why? Because morals don't sell. But sex does!

### **Power-Crazy Leadership**

Of course, power is important. It empowers you to make things happen, influence people, and transform organization. But sometimes, unfettered power and the craze for power can and often lead to abuse. As Guinness once again commented most mournfully, "Winning friends and influencing people is only the kindergarten course. At graduate levels, all of life can come under our 'control' and be ours to 'exploit.' 'Masters of the Universe' are power wielders *par excellence*. People are reduced to pawns to be pushed around on a chessboard as life is reduced to power games."

John Patterson, CEO of National Cash Register from 1884 to 1921, was a man of such extremes. He had a three-step approach to employee development: first, break a person's self-esteem, second, rebuild it from scratch and third, he would fire him.<sup>iii</sup> "When a man gets indispensable, let's fire him" was his dictum and the doomed executive would face this tirade, "Everything that you say is wrong. Everything that you do is wrong." (He embodied the kind of one-person command-and-control, top-down leadership where owners and leaders were one and the same. It was estimated that one-sixth of top executives between 1910 and 1930 had been schooled by Patterson.<sup>iv</sup>

### **World Of Image-Making And Spin-Doctor**

Jean Baptiste Colbert, chief financial advisor to Louis XIV, was the architect of France's 'domination through fashion'. He championed, "With our taste, let us make war on Europe and through fashion conquered the world."<sup>v</sup> French *haute couture* has been legendary ever since. Colbert's influence had widespread impact: the promotion of style and image had become the currency of modern politics and leadership.

Vogue's editor Diana Vreeland's motto was, "fake it, fake it...Never worry about facts. Project an image to the public. The art of success is to create a world as you feel it to be, as you wish it to be, as you wish it into being."<sup>vi</sup> As a result, character becomes the casualty.

### **Dearth Of Role-Models Of Fine Character**

Leaders with great character are far and few in between. This dearth has created a vacuum. Today's role models are sex-scandalized football stars and actors/actresses, earning obscene wealth, parading their well-sculptured bodies, and admired by millions of fans. Even in the corporate world, very little is written about humble leaders of great character. More space is given to outstanding CEOs who made the quickest bucks but little is said about how unethically they have acquired their wealth, or how they have neglected their families in the pursuit of the Almighty Dollar. We laud their achievements but without corresponding concern for their "means to an end."

Hence, the question that needs to be asked, "Does character matter?" We shall pursue this subject in our next MetaTrends.

## Survey

Of all these factors listed, which do you think is the No. 1 factor that has eroded character in leadership? Result will be announced in the next issue.

1. Fascination With Evil
2. Bottom Line Comes First
3. Victim Of Liberalism
4. Power Crazy Leadership
5. World Of Image-Making & Spin Doctor
6. Dearth Of Role Models
7. Others, please state: \_\_\_\_\_

John Ng, *Ph.D*

President

Meta

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Tel: (65) 6419 5255

Fax: (65) 6227 7170

Email: john@meta.com.sg

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<sup>i</sup> Guinness, O. 1999. Character Counts. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

<sup>ii</sup> Guinness, O. 1999. Character Counts. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

<sup>iii</sup> Useem, J. 2002. Tyrants, Statesmen, and Destroyers (A brief history of CEO). November 18. 2002. Fortune Magazine. USA.

<sup>iv</sup> Useem, J. 2002. Tyrants, Statesmen, and Destroyers (A brief history of CEO). November 18. 2002. Fortune Magazine. USA.

<sup>v</sup> Guinness, O. 1999. Character Counts. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

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