

Your Character

Character is the combination of qualities that distinguishes one person from another. Put another way, your character is who you are on the inside. Your character is comprised of the things you do when you think no one's ever going to find out. Aristotle said, "Character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion." People of character possess integrity, honesty, sincerity and maturity. In fact, in a Korn/Ferry and UCLA-conducted study, it was found that 71 percent of 1,300 surveyed senior executives said that integrity was the quality most needed to succeed in business.

I consider integrity to be the foundation of character. In the Bible, integrity refers to individuals whose actions match the teachings and word of God. In his best-selling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey talks about how integrity is crucial to one's ultimate success:

If I try to use human influence strategies and tactics of how to get other people to do what I want, to work better, to be more motivated, to like me and each other—while my character is fundamentally flawed, marked by duplicity or insincerity— then, in the long run, I cannot be successful. My duplicity will breed distrust, and everything I do—even using so-called good human relations techniques—will be perceived as manipulative. It simply makes no difference how good the rhetoric is or even how good the intentions are; if there is little or no trust, there is no foundation for permanent success. Only basic goodness gives life to technique.

Having integrity is like having a rock-solid dam. People know a good, solid dam will hold and will provide many benefits, such as electricity, water and recreation. If you are perceived as lacking in integrity, however, it's like having holes and leaks in your dam. When the leaks appear, everyone downstream abandons their trust in the old dam and seeks higher ground. Respect is lost and people place their trust in someone else they believe has greater integrity. We can all learn from the wisdom of the ancient Israelite, King Solomon. He is recorded as saying, "A good name is more desirable than great

riches.” If owning a good reputation is like owning gold, then owning integrity is like owning the mine. Abraham Lincoln gave another good analogy: “Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.”

Notice my choice of the words “perceive” and “believe” in the preceding paragraph. When attempting to build trust in others, it is wise to avoid even the appearance of anything that may be considered as immoral or a breach of integrity. It is human nature for people to cast sweeping judgments and to even spread their opinions when they don’t have all the facts. If you never place yourself in a situation where one might be misled about you or your integrity, then your good, hard-earned reputation will never be compromised. D. L. Moody once stated, “If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself.” Never do the type of things that would make you or your family cringe to hear or read about. Striving to maintain integrity is like having a Guardian Angel. If you pay attention to it, it will keep you on track. When faced with a moral dilemma, remember the adage of Phillips Brooks, a nineteenth-century clergyman: “Character is made in the small moments in our lives.”

Abraham Lincoln stands as a worthy role model for anyone who wants to develop character. He once said, “When I lay down the reins of this administration, I want to have one friend left. And that friend is inside myself.” This statement was a particularly poignant desire given that Lincoln was criticized so viciously while he was in office. Nevertheless, he always remained true to what he believed in his heart was right and true.

The Latin root of the word “sincerity” is *sincerus*, which means “without wax.” Pillar sculptors sometimes used wax to hide their mistakes so they could still pass their work off as unflawed. Years of weathering, however, eventually revealed their deception. As a result, a sincere person was considered to be one without wax or camouflage. Today, wax or no wax, the average person can sense falsehood, deception or insincerity in another. Be aware that there is more to being honest than just not getting caught in a lie. Author Joseph Sugarman explains, “Every time you are honest and conduct yourself with

honesty, a success force will drive you toward greater success. Each time you lie, even with a little white lie, there are strong forces pushing you toward failure.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. also defined character in this way: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

Trustworthiness increases when we are big enough to own up to our mistakes and weaknesses. People can forgive weakness, but they won't be as quick to forgive cover-ups. Oftentimes, if a salesperson is open about a weakness or drawback in a particular product, s/he still closes the deal. If you can present both sides of an issue, you will be considered fairer and more honest. Often, your honesty will be the characteristic that wins people over. In the end, it is better to risk rejection than to hide something your prospect will later find out on her/his own.

When it comes to marketing, honesty sells. Companies that reveal a product's weaknesses are perceived as more honest and trustworthy than those that try to cover up their product's faults. Many master marketers can even turn that weakness into a positive selling point. When we reveal a product's negatives, not only does it instill greater trust in our prospects, but it opens their minds so that the negatives are always accepted as truth. Think of the following examples:

Avis™ – We are #2 and we try harder

Listerine™ – The taste you hate twice a day

7-UP™ – The Un-cola

L'Oreal™ – Because I'm worth it

Volkswagon™ – VW will stay ugly longer