

FEATURE ARTICLES

A New Generation of Wise Thinkers and Good Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Dynamics of connection, complexity, and precarity make leadership in the 21st century a challenging task. This article considers the turn to values-based and person-centered leadership that has resulted and the correlate movement in leadership development, where there is a focus not only on technical but relational competencies, allied to leader behaviors and mindsets. Deficits when it comes to the integration and depth of competency-based approaches highlight the importance of character. The article makes a case for character development in leadership education, drawing on the work of the Oxford Character Project at the University of Oxford to explore what character is, what character contributes when it comes to leadership, and how character might be cultivated in a new generation of wise thinkers and good leaders.¹

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¹ I am grateful to Emmie Bidston, Katy Granville-Chapman, and Matthew Lee for many stimulating discussions on character, flourishing and leadership. My thanks to them as well as to Jonathan Brant and Paul Watts for feedback on a draft of this article. This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic into the challenges and opportunities of re-building, the need for competent, values-based leaders at all levels of society is evident. What is equally evident is that the task of leadership that lies before them is far from straightforward. In recent years, a succession of major societal challenges and prominent public failures have put the leadership of those in positions of power and authority in the spotlight. There are specific issues in different sectors of society and parts of the world, but they are manifestations of similar underlying dynamics and trust in leaders has been widely eroded. In 2020, the Edelman index highlighted the extent of the challenge, reporting that 66% of people in their global survey “do not have confidence that our current leaders will be able to successfully address our country’s challenges” (Edelman, 2020, p. 6). According to Edelman, trust is built on two foundations: competence and ethics. This article will argue that a focus on character is key to their integration and so to the development of the leaders that we need to take us forward.

However, if it is tempting to invoke failures of character as the central issue in a widespread crisis of leadership, we should be cautious. While some leaders have fallen short of the expectations of their office and example of their predecessors, there have been many capable and responsible leaders who have been characterised by a commitment to the common good. What is more, where leaders have failed there are often institutional as well as individual factors at play. If character is part of the story, its role needs to be understood in a way that is nuanced, taking account of situational variables and the significant challenges that leaders face. To move forward, we need to consider the adequacy of current approaches to leadership in the face of complexity and uncertainty, and not only the flaws and failures of individual leaders themselves. We also need to consider the adequacy of leadership education to prepare leaders for the responsibilities they assume. The fact that a breakdown of trust in leaders across sectors has coincided with billions of dollars of annual investment in leadership development (Gurdjian et al., 2014; Kellerman, 2018) raises vital questions about the way leadership is imagined and leaders are prepared.

This article will explore in broad strokes some of the challenges of leadership in the 21st century, where dynamics of connectivity, complexity, and precarity, introduced along with incredible advances in digital technology, have resulted in widespread division, disorientation, and distrust. We will consider the turn to “values-based” and “human-centered” leadership that has resulted and the correlate movement when it comes to leadership development, where there is an increasing focus not only on technical but relational competencies, allied to leader behaviors and mindsets. This direction of travel is welcome. However, important deficits with respect to the integration and depth of prevalent competency-based approaches to leadership development need to be addressed. This article will argue that the introduction of character as a focal theme in contemporary leadership discourse might go some way to addressing these deficits. We will consider what character is, what character contributes when it comes to leadership, and how character might be cultivated in a new generation of wise thinkers and good leaders.

Challenges of Leadership in the 21st Century

To discern the leadership and leader(ship) education that is needed as we look to the future requires an understanding of trends in the development of modernity that have and continue to shape the nature of the challenges that leaders face. The last hundred years have seen new technologies drive social, geopolitical, and environmental changes. Institutions across sectors have faced pressure to adapt, and there has been a growing transition from mechanistic to humanistic approaches to management and leadership that has accelerated in the early part of the 21st century. If the leaders of a century ago relied on technical expertise and a top-down approach of command and control, leaders

in the 21st century need to be able to get things done in a way that relies much more on collective purpose and creative cross-boundary collaboration.

In 1911, Frederick Winslow Taylor wrote what was to become one of the most influential management works of the 20th century (Bedeian & Wren, 2001). An engineer turned management consultant, Taylor's argument in *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Taylor, 1911/1919) was that social prosperity could be advanced by raising productivity, and that productivity could be dramatically increased by the "substitution of science for rule-of-thumb methods in even the smallest details of the work of every trade" (Taylor, 1911/1919, p. 24). Systematic study of workplace processes, Taylor argued, would enable the identification of a single approach "which is quicker and better than the rest" (Taylor, 1911/1919, p. 25). The role of management is to identify and implement this approach, taking responsibility to determine the most efficient way for workers in specific areas to conduct their allotted tasks. Managers should select those best suited for each role according to natural aptitude and physiological ability, provide incentives that align with the increased profits of anticipated output, and train workers to carry out tasks in the most efficient way.

Taylor's was a doctrine designed to fit the world of work as he perceived it at the start of the 20th century. He advanced his case by way of examples from specific industrial processes, such as the manual transfer of pig iron onto haulage wagons at a steel company, and trades, such as bricklaying. At the heart of his approach is a commitment to efficiency and authority. Once managers had identified the most efficient method of work, it was their responsibility to implement them through "enforced standardization of methods, enforced adoption of the best implements and working conditions, and enforced cooperation" (Taylor, 1919, p. 83, emphasis in original). Taylor talked in the language of management rather than leadership, a focus on

which would only come to the fore later in the 20th century, but what is important is that the method is very much command and control. It came down to determining the right approach and directing the people and process.

Some aspects of Taylor's system are distinctly unscientific by today's reckoning, not least the idea from early 20th century eugenics that each person has a fixed "personal coefficient" (Taylor, 1919, p. 89) that should be used to determine the nature of work for which they are suited. However, while this disreputable idea could be left behind in the ongoing application of Taylor's basic method, changes in the complexity of systems that came with the 20th century transition from an industrial to digital economy, and the more recent introduction of smart machines in what has become known as the "fourth industrial revolution" (Schwab, 2017), have meant that Taylor's mechanised approach to management has become increasingly obsolete (Hamel & Zanini, 2020). If Taylor's principles could be successfully applied in tightly structured contexts, rising interest in the idea of leadership and the emergence of leadership studies as a distinct field of academic inquiry in the final quarter of the 20th century reflect the fact that they were insufficient for the increasing complexity of industry and society that emerged as the century progressed.

Central to this new wave of interest in leadership was a distinction between leaders and managers (Zaleznik, 1977/2004), and a focus on transformational over transactional models of leader-follower relations, stemming from the work of James McGregor Burns (Burns, 1978/2010). Transactional leadership is based on a dynamic of exchange, with clearly defined responsibilities, tasks, and targets. Transformational leadership, by contrast, centers on relational engagement, where the purposes of leader(s) and follower(s) "become fused" and they are both raised to "higher levels of motivation and morality" (Burns,

2010, p. 18). As the idea of transformational leadership was developed (Burns' original term was "transforming leadership"), emphasis was placed on leaders "inspiring followers to commit to a shared vision" (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 4), and the expansion of leadership beyond formal hierarchies. In this model, "Leadership is not just the province of people at the top. Leadership can occur at all levels and by any individual. In fact, we see that it is important for leaders to develop leadership in those below them" (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 2).

If the idea of transformational leadership has been somewhat eclipsed by a plethora of leadership models in the last twenty years, it remains foundational to many of them, reflecting the limits of mechanistic and transactional approaches in a changing world. Considering the future of leadership education necessitates an awareness of these changes and the kinds of challenges they bring with them. As former Harvard President, Derek Bok, argues in his manifesto for higher education in the 21st century, "significant changes in our society have given rise to new pressures that call for fresh thought about the content and instructional methods" (Bok, 2021, p. 1). This is as true for the development of leaders as it is for higher education more broadly.

When it comes to leadership the changes and pressures that Bok refers to have been variously summarized, including in the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) acronym popularised by the U.S. Army War College (Stiehm, 2002) and the description of leadership challenges as "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Back of these interpretations it is possible to discern three late modern trends, namely increasing connectivity, complexity, and precarity. Rapid advances in communication technologies and global travel have

connected people and processes across borders in ways that cannot be reversed. Concerns are tied together in global trade, security, environmental policy, the internet, and evidently in public health. And these global connections have local impact. For example, a firm that is an important employer in a particular community is increasingly likely to be connected in its fortunes to global supply chains and fiscal policy. Connection is thus tied to complexity, as leaders have to account for a far greater number of variables, potential risks, and stakeholder interests. There are new opportunities, to be sure, but there are also new challenges of working within complex systems. The

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idea of precarity captures this dynamic—global supply chains bring new opportunities for local businesses, but they can be unexpectedly halted by a ship running aground in the Suez Canal. The opportunities of global travel come with the risks of global transmission, as in the COVID-19 pandemic. And the potential for movements to spread virally can fuel democratic renewal but it can also fuel destructive populist radicalism. The same dynamics that have advanced democracy and opportunity around the world now threaten division, disorientation, and distrust. The instability of the status quo can easily leave leaders in a perpetual mode of response to the latest crisis, unable to build intentionally and constructively for the long term. The leaders we need in the 21st century are those who are able to make the most of the opportunities and

build resilience to mitigate the challenges. As I will go on to argue, this requires attention to competence and to character—what leaders do and who leaders are.

Developing Leader(ship) Competencies

In recent years, an increasingly prominent approach to leadership education in organizations has focused on the development of specific “competencies”—knowledge, skills and personal characteristics that are manifested in behaviors required for effective performance (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999; Boyatzis, 2008; Washington & Griffiths, 2015; Cumberland et al., 2016). An important strength of this behaviorist approach is the way in which visible behaviors are understood as rooted in hidden attitudes, motives, and intentions in an integrated model of human personality developed by Richard Boyatzis (1982) from the work of David McClelland (1951). This has allowed a more holistic focus to emerge in leadership development, incorporating aspects of social and emotional intelligence and personal values, attitudes, and motivation that lie beneath the surface of human action (Washington & Griffiths, 2015). It has also provided important consistency for organizations, allowing them to set clear expectations around the practices and standards required, and implement structured approaches to leadership development.

Recent work by Gosling and Grodecki (2020) evaluates this focus on leadership competencies in view of failures in organizational leadership and the prominent social and environmental challenges, discussed above. A survey of initiatives seeking to advance social responsibility, sustainable development, and responsible business identified four clusters of ideal leadership competencies: (1) “Act ethically and virtuously,” (2) “Work inclusively (because we value human dignity),” (3) “Engage stakeholders (to understand the concerns and impact on others),” (4) “Achieve change (to make the world a better place)” (Gosling & Grodecki, 2020, pp. 248-251). If this

ideal picture emphasizes both leader competence and character, a subsequent review of the competency frameworks of 22 U.K. organizations in the private and public sectors was not so encouraging:

The clear focus for most organisations is on developing leaders that are skilled at working with their teams and others around them, and can get things done. There is little recognition of the need for managers to engage stakeholders or concern themselves with “others” (especially others beyond customers, such as the environment, future generations, society at large). If there is a concern for virtue, it is usually implicit (Gosling & Grodecki, 2020, p. 251).

Insofar as competency-based approaches to leadership development hold value, this research suggests that an important step is for organizations to align their frameworks beyond profit to positive social purpose. However, while this would be very welcome, limitations inherent in competency models point toward the need for a longer journey. Bolden and Gosling (2006) compiled five commonly cited weaknesses, arguing that competency-based approaches tend to be fragmentary, generic, focused on current rather than future requirements, overly concerned with measurable outcomes, and mechanistic. The final point seems to cut to the heart of these criticisms, expressing an underlying concern that the approach is insufficiently human. In particular, it fails to take sufficient account of human individuality, identity, and relationality.

Firstly, leadership competency frameworks are insufficiently flexible to situational and personal variables. While such frameworks can provide clarity, they do so by way of standardization, listing the specific attributes and actions that will generally enable leaders to perform ethically and effectively. As a result, competencies can fail to take account of

human individuality and the personal judgment that accords with the practice of leadership as an art and not simply a science (Grint, 2004). Secondly, the prevalent competency-based approach, while more holistic than a simple focus on outward behaviors, is ultimately rooted in the physiology of neural circuits and patterns of hormonal cause and effect (Boyatzis, 2008). Recent neuroscientific insights are important for theories of personal development, supporting the ongoing potential for deep and lasting character development into adulthood (Williams, in press). However, human identity is more than brain chemistry, human action gains coherence within the drama of narrative in which human beings are moral agents, guided by deep commitments, meaning and purpose, which go beyond neural circuitry and measurable hormones. Thirdly, focusing on leadership competencies can place the focus on individuals, overlooking human relationality and the importance of social interaction and organizational design. It is all very well developing a competency framework that emphasises collaboration, for example, but if incentives such as financial rewards and role recognition are strongly individualistic, or if office architecture or workplace practices limit inter-departmental mixing then collaborative action will be undermined.

It is in view of these challenges with prevalent competency-based approaches to leadership development that we turn to character, which provides a paradigm for leadership development that deepens an emphasis on coded behaviors by drawing on resources from current work in virtue ethics and moral psychology.

The Contribution of Character

In his recent book, *Value(s): Building a Better World For All*, Mark Carney (2021) argues that successfully responding to major challenges faced by society in the 21st century requires focused attention on what we value and what our values are. Carney's case material is

three global crises—the financial crash, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the environmental crisis that threatens to undermine the finely balanced stability of the planet unless urgent action is taken. A renewal of values-based leadership is crucial, he argues, in order to rebuild the trust required for collective action. At the heart of this renewal is the cultivation of virtues—not simply what leaders do but who leaders are. This focus on leader character has come to the fore during the pandemic as leaders have been celebrated or castigated based on such fundamental qualities as their humanity toward others in need, their humility in the face of complex challenges and conflicting evidence, and their hope in maintaining a focus on the good and inspiring others to persevere through difficulty.

Of course, the idea of character as central to leadership is an ancient one, dating back to the classical writings of Plato and Aristotle in the West and Confucius in the East (Hackett & Wang, 2012). At its core it represents a focus on the human person—who leaders are grounding how they lead—but it has been variously interpreted. For example, the language of character has been associated with individualistic “great man” and static “trait” theories of leadership, giving it historical resonances that some find hard to move beyond. However, it has become prominent in a new way in the turn to transformational leadership, which emphasizes the importance of leaders moving beyond managerial efficiency to ethical empowerment. Here, the contribution of character is as a concept that brings clarity to both the moral foundations of authentic transformational leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), and the commitment to truth that is required for the rebuilding of trust. In this regard it is important to recognize that personal character isn't simply a moral category but also has an intellectual dimension (Aristotle, 1999; Baehr, 2011), encompassing care for truth, evidence, and rationality as well as open-mindedness, curiosity, and intellectual humility. In Aristotelian accounts of character these

moral and intellectual dimensions are held together by practical wisdom, a central character quality or “meta-virtue” that combines deliberation of relevant features of contexts and discernment of the good in a way that integrates ethical and effective practice and guides action through the challenges of complex dilemmas.

The contention as we turn to character here is twofold: firstly, that the concept of character can helpfully extend prevalent competency-based approaches to leadership by engaging the aspects of human personhood—individuality, judgment, identity and relationality—identified above; secondly, that by taking a more deeply person-centred approach the cultivation of character can help leaders to successfully engage the opportunities and challenges of leadership in our complex and uncertain times. In order to

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ground these claims in the practice of leadership development, we will focus on the work of the Oxford Character Project (OCP), an interdisciplinary initiative at the University of Oxford dedicated to furthering a new generation of wise thinkers and good leaders. Founded in 2014, the OCP seeks to advance empirical and conceptual research on character and leadership development in universities and commercial organizations, joining insights from the humanities with the latest developments in social and behavioural science. This research is applied in the design, delivery and evaluation of practical programs for emerging leaders. Taking the approach of the OCP as a case study, we will consider three important issues: what character is, its contribution to leadership in the 21st century, and how it can be developed.

What is Character?

To understand what a focus on character contributes to leadership, we need to clarify what is meant by character. This specificity is particularly important for two reasons: to distinguish the idea of character and character education from problematic uses in the past (Sayer, 2020), and to discern between different understandings and emphases that are part of a welcome increase in attention to character in organizational and leadership studies in the present.

Historically, hegemonic models of character formation have been taken up on both the political left and right, aimed at the “reproduction of compliant or socially acceptable human beings” (Arthur, 2020, p. 18). Such approaches have used the concept of character to reinforce social hierarchy, limit self-expression, and diminish diversity. The recent turn to character in moral philosophy and positive psychology and its practical outworking in character education is strongly distinct, emphasizing at its core the classical connection between virtues (excellences) of character and eudaimonic well-being or human flourishing. The OCP sits in the philosophical stream of this turn to character that draws on contemporary work in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics and moral psychology (Snow, 2020; Miller, 2021). On this understanding, character comprises a constellation of dispositions that are at the heart of human personality and shape how we characteristically think, perceive, feel, and act (Annas, 2011; Aristotle, ca. 340 B.C.E./1999; Kristjánsson, 2017; Miller, 2014; Snow, 2010). Character has a motivational component (the “heart” of character) and a skill component (the “art” of character), involving not only aspiration but successful action, especially under pressure. Qualities of character can be cultivated (and corrupted), as we will consider below, but they are not easily altered, persisting over time and across different situations. They can be variously categorised but two

fundamental distinctions are (1) between moral character qualities (e.g., justice, courage, generosity, hope, and love) and intellectual character qualities (e.g., open-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual humility, and rationality); and (2) between positive character qualities, or “virtues” (including all those listed so far) and negative ones, or “vices” (e.g., greed, hubris, envy, presumption, insouciance, and apathy).

Character virtues are human excellences, which, guided by practical wisdom, dispose people to think, feel and act in a way that avoids vices of deficiency and excess, but follows a “mean” or intermediate path that is appropriate to the context—“at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way” (Aristotle, ca. 340 B.C.E./1999, 1106b22-23). By contrast, vices are by nature out of balance and at odds with what is right and good (Cassam, 2019; DeYoung, 2009). An important benefit of focusing on character virtues in relationship to leadership is the resultant sensitivity to the particularities of individual circumstance and adaptability to specific contexts. When it comes to identifying certain virtues as a focus for leaders, their practical importance is context dependent, which allows them to be listed according to different domains, such as citizenship, athletics, education, and business. While some virtues, such as humanity, humility, and hope (Carney, 2021, p. 381), may be relevant for leadership across sectors, others may be more or less important depending on the particular context. The idea of a comprehensive model of “leadership virtues” with a set of virtues for leadership in all contexts may be elusive and practically less important than closer consideration of domains and identification of virtues that are most salient for leaders within them. However, in thinking about the virtues needed for specific sectors or roles, two fundamental categories are key: intellectual virtues are what we need for good thinking across situations, and moral virtues are at the heart of a well-lived

life. Together, they are central to what it means for people to flourish, living in accord with their full human potential.

Contrary to hegemonic, static, and individualistic notions of character, on the account presented here, character is complex, comprising a mosaic of different qualities in a way that is unique to each individual. It is plural, rather than unitary; dynamic in that it can be developed (and diminished) over time; rational, combining thought and habitual action; social, shaped in relationship with others in specific cultural contexts; and mixed, with most people being neither virtuous nor vicious but possessing local character qualities that are restricted to specific situations, and global traits that combine positive and negative dispositions (Miller, 2020).

The recovery of character as a productive concept in moral philosophy, psychology, and education in the latter part of the 20th century has led to a variety of understandings making their way into leadership discourse. The pioneering work of Peterson and Seligman in positive psychology, represented in the VIA classification of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) has been taken up in positive organizational scholarship and virtuous leadership (Cameron, 2011; Rego et al., 2012). Others have remained more closely aligned with philosophical virtue ethics (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Newstead et al., 2019; Sison, 2006). There have also been proposals to integrate approaches (e.g., Bright et al., 2014) and helpful practice-oriented schemas that have focused less on theories of character than the practical application of virtues in leadership, leadership development, and assessment (Seijts et al., 2015; Crossan et al., 2016). There are strengths in each of these approaches, but the distinctions are not immaterial, and different conceptual understandings shape practical emphases and approaches when it comes to character and leadership development.

What Does (Good) Character Contribute to Leadership?

The importance of good character for leadership is a historic debate that pitches Aristotle and Confucius on the one side against Machiavelli on the other. In a number of countries around the world it is a live, and often heated, discussion in relation to contemporary leaders. While there are certainly leaders who lack good character and get much done, the cultivation of virtues has a particular importance for leaders today.

Firstly, many of the widescale social and environmental challenges facing society in the twenty-first century highlight the importance of the character of leaders as a contributing factor in their origin or ongoing impact (Brooks et al., 2021). Greed, hubris, dishonesty, dogmatism, close-mindedness, and presumption—to name only some prominent leadership vices—have played a part in the cause and ongoing impact of such events as the global financial crisis, turmoil in the Middle East, the COVID pandemic, and climate change. If we are to learn from these crises and better engage them and other like challenges that will emerge in the future, our learning needs to go beyond matters of process and procedure to take account of the underlying human dynamics. In the Nolan Principles (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995), the UK has seven values of public life that are fitting for leaders across contexts: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership. Resisting leadership vices by way of an active focus on cultivating these principles as virtues in leadership education would—if done effectively—contribute to the mitigation and management of such challenges into the future and begin to engage the documented deficit in trust.

Secondly, a focus on character can support the growing emphasis on values and purpose in organizations and leadership that was already present but has come even more strongly to the fore through

the COVID pandemic. The principles identified by the UK Committee on Standards in Public Life have for some years been matched by like statements of values in organizations across sectors and an emphasis on leaders as role models. There is an increasing focus on the importance of these values for leaders, with research-backed advocacy of generosity (Grant, 2013), creativity (Hill et al., 2014), psychological safety (Edmonson, 2019); courage (Brown, 2018); and kindness (Haskins et al., 2018). These emphases are welcome and bring with them examples and ideas of how these values or qualities might be enacted in practice. What a turn to character provides is a way of understanding these separate leadership qualities as part of a coherent whole and a way to develop them personally and organizationally, moving from aspirational values to stable practices. If we take character as a nexus of the two components of aspiration (motivation) and action (skill/success), and the idea of character virtues as developed through practice until they are stable over time and across situations, virtues can act as the intellectual and moral muscles that enable values to live. On their own, values and principles are inert, depending on relevant motivation and application. Cultivating character presents a path to the integration and practical application of leadership values in a way that is stable over time and—by way of practical wisdom—sensitive to specific leadership contexts.

Thirdly, character offers promise in relation to the wider dynamics of connection, complexity, and precarity that dominate the leadership landscape as persistent features of late modern life. While different constellations of virtues may be needed to lead well in different sectors or domains, these broader societal dynamics will require leaders to exhibit pro-social and intellectual virtues as well as the virtue of hope. To navigate a connected world, leaders will need pro-social virtues such as empathy, compassion, and service, in order to work well with others and play their part in a bigger picture as collaborative “system changers”

(Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). Intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, judgment, and practical wisdom will enable leaders to engage positively with complexity. And the virtue of hope—a middle path between presumption and despair—will be essential in the face of precarity, joining realism with the resilience needed to work through difficulty toward the future good.

What should be clear, even from this outline of the contribution of character to leadership in the 21st century is that the cultivation of virtue has both a fundamental intrinsic worth and an important performance benefit. Kim Cameron highlights the practical benefit of virtue in terms of coping with change and increasing performance (Cameron, 2011). When it comes to the latter, virtuous leadership amplifies team performance and buffers against dysfunction (Cameron & Caza, 2002). In commercial terms, engagement and so output is increased, and risk is diminished. In human terms, leading with character furthers the flourishing of leaders and those they lead, which in turn contributes to flourishing organizations and societies.

How Can the Character of Leaders be Developed?

The arguments presented concerning the importance of character virtues for good leadership have assumed that it is possible for leaders to grow in character and permissible to consider this development as an important part of leadership education. Since its inception, the OCP has made central to its research the hypothesis that it is indeed possible and permissible, focusing on higher education and commercial organizations. There are valid concerns and objections, of course, central amongst which is the danger of infringing personal autonomy. It can be answered by the plain reality that all institutions, and particularly educational institutions inevitably *do* shape the character of those whose life is led in relation to their structures, processes, values, and practices. This being

the case, institutions surely *should* consider how they can support the development of good character and promote human flourishing, helping people to grow in a self-guided way, strengthening powers of perception, deliberation, motivation, and action (Brooks et al., in press).

Moving from the permissibility to the possibility of character development, it is a conviction of Aristotelian moral psychology, supported by contemporary neuroscience (Williams, in press) that character is not set in stone but develops over a lifespan. The stability of character, which once developed is like second nature, and reliance on supportive contexts, means that it is not easy to acquire character virtues. However, controlled, longitudinal, mixed methods research studies, including those undertaken by the OCP, show that character can be developed in ways relevant to good leadership through leadership development programs (Brooks et al., 2019; Brant et al., 2020, Brooks et al., 2021).

The development of effective pedagogical methods for character development that can be integrated into leadership development, and the measurement of their efficacy is central to our ongoing research. A first phase of work identified and implemented seven research-based methods:

- 1) Habituation through practice,
- 2) reflection on personal experience,
- 3) engagement with virtuous exemplars,
- 4) dialogue that increases virtue literacy,
- 5) awareness of situational variables,
- 6) moral reminders,
- 7) friendships of mutual accountability (Lamb et al., in press).

These pedagogical methods outline a path of personal formation that takes time and ongoing attention. It is both deeper and more integrated than competency-

based approaches, but it will take commitment and patience to introduce in organizational contexts since character is both difficult to cultivate and difficult to measure. The work of the OCP is based on the conviction that the person, organizational and societal importance of the character of leaders means that this difficulty should not deter us from trying. Our current research builds on these methods of personal formation with a focus on the situational and contextual factors which impact the character of leaders in commercial organizations. These factors constitute the moral and intellectual ecosystem of an organization, going beyond culture narrowly understood to encompass all the aspects of organizational life, which contribute to the way people feel, think, and act. Central to this institutional emphasis is the conviction that focusing on character in leadership development is not about “fixing” individuals but about helping people to grow in a self-guided way, strengthening powers of perception, deliberation, motivation, and action. The cultivation of character needs to go beyond personal formation to organizations so that they support the cultivation of character virtues relevant to their values and purpose and those of their people rather than obstruct or undermine values and purpose coming into their own.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has forced a re-evaluation of priorities and purpose. Hard questions have been raised regarding what we value in society, and while leadership failures and wider self-interest have been part of the story, fundamental values of solidarity, compassion, and hope have come to the fore. As the future beyond COVID-19 begins to come into view, the present offers a window of opportunity to determine how we will go forward. The need for a new generation of leaders who will further the flourishing of society and the planet, placing the public good above personal gain, is apparent. This paper has argued that attention to character is essential for leaders to successfully face the complex challenges that lie before us. The present emphasis on values and

purpose in leadership and organizations is welcome, but there is a need to integrate action with aspiration. There is much promise to be found in turning to character, focusing on organizational design along with personal formation, and aiming leadership development toward the cultivation of virtues as the moral and intellectual muscles that can power a flourishing future.

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