

If You Are Running a Small Business **Character** Matters!



TRANSEARCH
EXECUTIVE SEARCH & LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

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“Talent is a gift; character is a choice.”

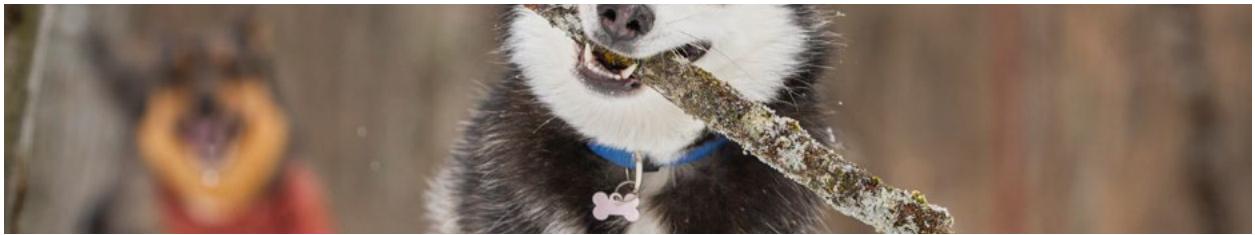
I still hear the term “normal times” being bandied about. The reality? A steady-state world rests firmly in the rearview mirror. In its place is uncertainty, technological disruption, turbulent trade policies and heightened concern from employees. The heightened concern being expressed as (i) loss of interest in the work when capability and opportunity are misaligned; (ii) lack of retention when a sense of belonging is missing; and (iii) the fear of falling behind when it comes to technology.

As the forest gets deeper and the trees bigger, we have to sharpen our saw: introduce and learn new skills. We also have to embrace a leadership quality that is, arguably, even more important – “character.”

What is character? Winston Churchill described character as “when you are going through hell, keep going.” When you add compassion and caring to determination, Nelson Mandella springs to mind.

What is character? An initial frame of reference points to passion, perseverance and speaking to power. Indeed, those are central dimensions of character. Yet, if you step back, you start to understand that character isn’t evident in what happens in the moment. It’s far more about the lasting influence that those with character have on the world around them.

What is character? Character isn’t happenstance – it’s intentional! It’s less about what one does and far more about what one creates. Far more about the deliberate and resulting shift in the wider context than in the immediate behaviour exhibited. We shouldn’t, therefore, confuse the appearance of character with a deep-rooted and intentional behaviour that makes a lasting difference. The difference is found in trust, tenacity and the impact achieved over the passage of time.

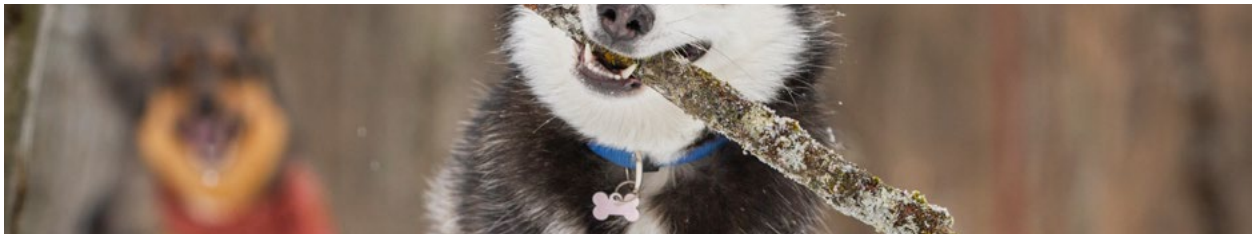


We absolutely need talent. Talent will get you to the start line. However, in a world where we don't always know what we think we know, where ever-increasing ambiguity is an uncontested reality and where, as a result, we often have to take the path less travelled, it's ultimately character that separates the winners from those who "also ran." More pointedly, anything beyond incremental change succeeds or fails on the interplay between organizational culture and leadership character.

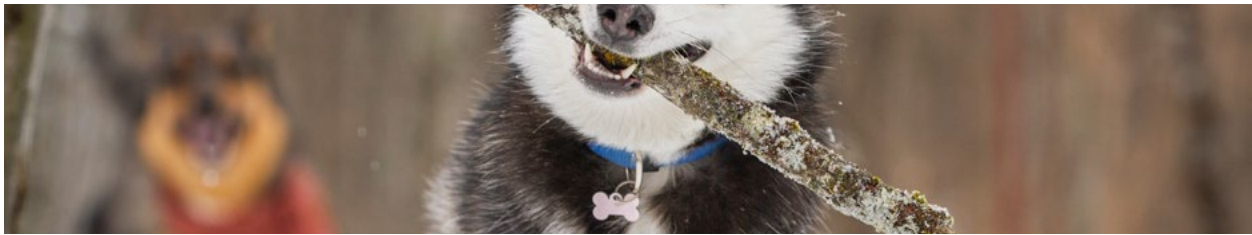
As important as character is for a major organization, it is even more important for a small business. Determination, resilience, caring, stretch and agility are imperatives in any business. In a small business, they determine survival (or not).

What follows are 10 descriptors of how character shows up in an organizational setting. Review each statement. Where can you say, with absolute certainty, "That is exactly how we behave."





1. We manage the business from the outside-in. Ongoing, fact-based analysis defines the emerging marketplace, provides insight into the competition's initiatives and helps us quickly respond to political/social/economic change. We regularly ask ourselves, "What do tomorrow's customers want to buy and how do they want to buy it?" As a result, we are quick to rework our value proposition. And with the emerging value proposition in mind, we invest time and resources, as needed, in new business development initiatives.
2. We have a highly lauded hiring process that embraces six dimensions of fit: (i) constantly refining attraction; (ii) a proven measure of both the culture we have and need; (iii) a robust scorecard; (iv) role-specific, future-oriented leadership competencies; (v) team assessment; and (vi) a highly lauded integration process. A theme that runs through our recruitment activity is to hire people, whenever possible, who are a step up from the individual doing the hiring.
3. A compelling purpose frames everything we do. Return on investment is essential and a great way to keep score, but it's not what attracts and/or retains top talent; it's not what inspires people to do what others say cannot be done.
4. While "catch people doing it right" is an overall theme, we also celebrate getting it wrong. This endorses a philosophy of not making the same mistake twice and the power of asking great questions. We also recognise that the real learning doesn't come from what we got wrong but from what we got right.
5. Mastery matters. We believe that if you can't coach, you can't lead. No less important, for a successful leader listening isn't simply an acquired skill; it's a way of life. The higher in business you go, the more important coaching and listening become.
6. Any of our leaders who fail to live/emphasise the organization's values every day in every way – regardless of their past results – are quickly separated.
7. To lead is to constantly strive to deliver results. Those with an ownership stake – a mission-critical role in a larger operation – seek to do more; they are driven to leave a legacy. Legacy leavers dream big dreams, create a strong and agile culture, build great teams, are storytellers and know when to step away. Evidence of leaving a legacy is that we have an outstanding successor in place for each mission-critical role.



8. We recognise that tomorrow's organization will be a team of teams. To that end, we recognise that every time we bring someone new to the team we have, essentially, created a new team. As a result, ongoing team assessment, psychological safety, clarifying both individual and team roles, providing the tools such that team members coach each other and offering a degree of choice around work-from-home scenarios are central to how we do business.
9. Regardless of the situation, we strive to adopt a beginner's mind. We quickly move beyond the tyranny of knowing. Every question is viewed as a new question. Seeking to merely do what you have always done but do it "better" is to assume that, when you are in a hole, the right strategy is to keep digging.
10. When the music changes, you have to learn a new dance. Beginnings start with endings. We know, specifically, what we need to let go of. At the same time we consistently explore how we can learn faster.

Tomorrow will be different. Will you? The 10 themes outlined capture how top leaders deliver character. Every statement describing behaviour that you are NOT enacting detracts from your ability to thrive in a world where the only thing that is predictable is unpredictability.

Consider your overall response to each of the 10 character-based themes. Again, with each theme in mind, which one of the four actions listed below describes how to move forward regarding that theme:

- Exactly who we are
- Some work needed
- A good deal of work needed
- As far as this theme is concerned, we need to reinvent ourselves

As a suggestion, go through the review as a team.

Note: *There is a good argument to suggest that a big organization is, ultimately, made up of a whole lot of small organizations.*



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JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams

around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, John has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His most recent book is a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*. To download his current business articles go to www.transearch.com/orxestra/downloads

