

Talent is a Gift.
Character is a Choice.

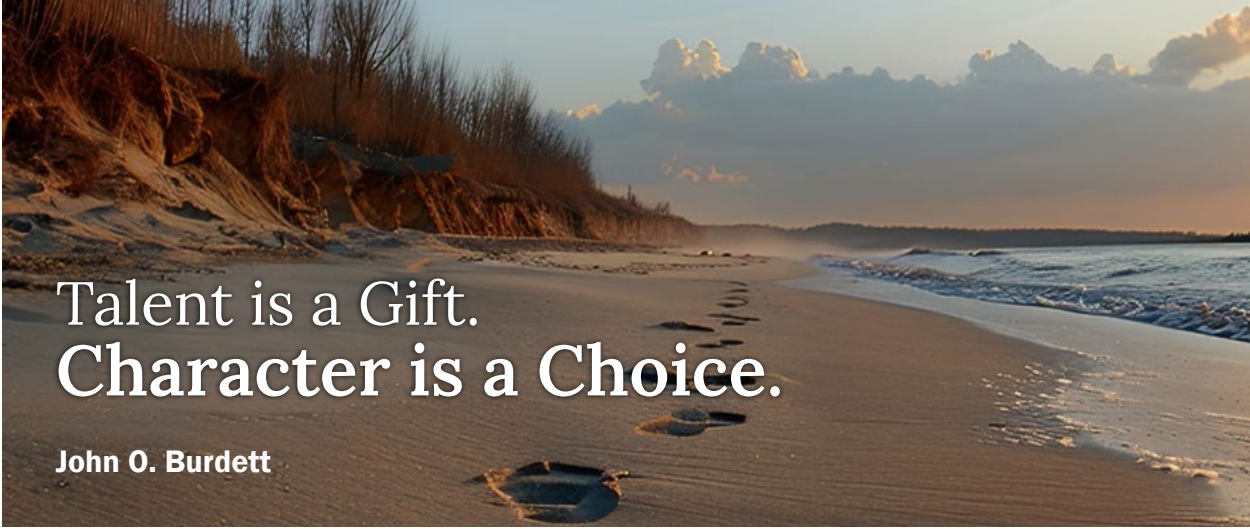


TRANSEARCH
EXECUTIVE SEARCH & LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

John O. Burdett



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Talent is a Gift. Character is a Choice.

John O. Burdett

*“Talent will get you to the start line but,
in turbulent times, it takes character to win.”*

Introduction

As a political prisoner, Nelson Mandela was incarcerated at Robben Island Prison, off Cape Town. He was there from 1964 to 1982. His thin mattress lay directly on the concrete floor; his cell hardly big enough to turn around in. His day-to-day occupation? Breaking rocks. Mandela was subsequently housed at the maximum-security Pollsmoor Prison until 1988. After being treated for tuberculosis, he was transferred to Victor Verster Prison near Paarl. Released in 1990, he became Deputy President of the African National Congress (ANC) and president of the party in July 1991. In 1994 he was elected President of South Africa.





Mandela might have been expected to adopt an agenda marked by rage, revenge and retribution. He didn't, because he cared more about a South Africa without apartheid than his own plight. The evidence? He formed a multi-ethnic government and even kept on his predecessor's white bodyguards. Incredibly, in 1995, he formed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After 27 years in prison where, to break his will, he was treated with unconscionable harshness, Mandela could have chosen to hate. He opted for compassion. That's character.

The dictionary defines character as "the combination of traits and qualities distinguishing the individual nature of a person or thing." People with character stand out. They display qualities that people admire. Moral force, integrity and/or resilience being examples of what others admire. When Winston Churchill said, "If you are going through hell, keep going," he was describing "character."

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.

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 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 influence and character.

Although, in a turbulent world, we need both, talent and character are very different. Talent is a gift. Character is a choice. There is a selfish side to talent. We exploit our talent. We use it to separate our personal contribution from middle-of-the-road performers. Character is altruistic. It's the response to an unexpected challenge or



opportunity. The greater the challenge, the deeper we need to dig into what it is that makes us who we are; the greater we display caring for others. Character without its alter ego – caring – is an empty vessel.

Character isn't simply personality under a different guise. Personality is a blend of genetics and where and how we grew up. Although Carl Jung's "balanced type" may enter the picture – an ability to adjust one's behaviour based on exigent circumstances – your personality is, literally, who you are. And in times of stress who we become. "The lady's not for turning" – Margaret Thatcher. Personality is our behavioural canvas. Character is found in the picture we choose to paint. "Character is that which reveals moral purpose, exposing the class of things a man chooses and avoids." – Anil Yadav.

In a world where strategy is, at best, a work in progress, organization culture comes to the fore. We know from the research that organization's that measure and manage culture realise three times (3X) the return than organizations whose leaders merely talk a good (culture) game.¹ Measurement implies a meaningful tool(s) – using easy-to-understand business terms – to build agreement around both today's culture and the culture the organization needs (not desires). Chasing an aspirational culture leads to unintended consequences. Managing culture speaks to three qualities: (1) trust building; (2) inspirational leadership; and (3) the ability to build followership, within and across the informal organization.

And the behavioural glue that binds those three attributes together? The leadership quality that is the difference that makes a lasting difference? Being the change! Character! "A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way." – John Maxwell.

Vince Lombardi, the late, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers famously said, "Winning isn't everything ... but wanting to is." Character is more than just an observable behaviour. It's a deep-rooted and undeniable way to be! While working for a client in Buenos Aires, I was set up to have dinner with Luis Scola, the Argentinian basketball superstar. When he joined the NBA's Houston Rockets, he found himself on the same team as the legendary Chinese player, Yao Ming. Determined to do well, Scola decided to come in to practice before anyone else. When he arrived early the following morning, however, Yao Ming was already there. The next day he arrived a full hour ahead of the practice time. Yao Ming was already there. The following day he

1 Carolyn Dewar, Martin Hirt and Scott Keller, "The mindsets and practices of excellent CEOs" (McKinsey & Company, October 2019).



came in two hours early. And you guessed it. Yoa Ming was already there. That's a mental attitude beyond a superlative skill. That's character.

There is a pragmatic question running through this introductory narrative. If I am trying to identify and/or seek to develop **CHARACTER**, what should I be looking for? After coaching a number of top, global executives who display what I think of as character, the “intentional behaviours” discussed in the following section represent an initial but significant step in answering that question. Meanwhile, cognitive capability, cultural reach, working hard and laser-like focus are the stock in trade of a successful leader.





Context shapes possibility. Content without context is commitment without clarity. Executives, all too often, take pride in saying that “they listen to their gut.” Why not? The visceral drive to address the immediate problem has high ego appeal. Character, by comparison, is to be fully wired into the wider context. It’s about knowing, really knowing. To that end, character begets great questions. What political, social and economic forces will shape tomorrow’s economy? What emerging technology, were we to implement it today, would make us more successful? What do tomorrow’s customers want to buy and how do they want to buy it? What’s the most damaging thing our most aggressive competitor could do to our business and how can we do it first? What culture do we need to be successful? What must we do that we are not already doing to attract and retain talent? In what ways will artificial intelligence (AI) force us to change how the organization is designed? What do we have to do to reduce our environmental footprint? “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.” – Mark Twain.





Context matters no less at a micro level. There are two kinds of change – hard change and easy change. Hard change is trying to persuade, cajole and/or demand that the individual act differently – in other words, trying to change someone’s behaviour. Good luck with that! Easy change is to alter the context and, in doing so, reframe how those involved perceive the opportunity. By way of example, don’t keep trying to force frustrated employees to fit into the ubiquitous, performance management, normal distribution curve, an approach much loved by those who see performance as binary – about winners and losers. Change the context. Change the very nature of the performance conversation. Make it challenge and coach – not criticise and control. Keep in mind also that telling someone they are “average,” “meet expectations,” “competent” or, even worse, “3.5 on a scale of 1-to-5,” is just about the best thing the competition has going for it. It can also be self-fulfilling.

Assuming that character is limited to an individual’s personal resources – as is invariably the case – is to also miss an important piece of the puzzle. Context matters and the right network, a support system and being around positive people make a difference. Leaders exhibiting character, invariably, surround themselves with talent who themselves display character. Character, as we will discuss in the next section, means, where possible, hiring talent who are a step up from the leader doing the hiring.

Character is about caring –
caring enough to ensure that it’s the emerging context
and not conjecture, uniformed opinion or gut feeling
that shapes both what’s possible and where opportunity lies.



Hires people better than themselves. Leaders who make a difference know that who they hire today determines what's possible tomorrow. Here we confront an uncomfortable truth. Extensive hiring experience doesn't necessarily make you better at it. Supported by little more than the job specification, the candidate's resume and possibly leadership competencies, the standard interview (an "inspired" chat) assumes that the interviewer is smart enough to penetrate the candidate's mask. In their book *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment*, Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony and Cass R. Sunstein call on the research to outline that the standard interview is statistically as useful as a coin toss. If that doesn't work for you, think of an eight-year-old throwing darts. The operative word? "Useless."

The limitations of the standard interview are exacerbated when accompanied by "dumb questions." A dumb question allows the candidate to come up with an off-the-cuff, impossible-to-validate hypothetical response. "Tell me about yourself?" "Outline your weaknesses and strengths?" "What is it about your current boss you





would like to change?” Add over-reliance on psychometric testing,² the propensity to “interview” the resume, asking the candidate to suggest their own referees, and you have the perfect formula for making a very expensive misstep in the hiring process. The problem? Shortcut the hiring process and/or assume that you instinctively know how a successful candidate is supposed to act and, like a business version of the movie *Groundhog Day*, your mistake turns up every day, every day, every day.

If you don’t know exactly what you are looking for, only an optimist on steroids would expect to find it. Hiring success draws on a deep-rooted and disciplined approach that embraces: (1) a winning hiring value proposition; (2) assessing culture fit; (3) a short-term and strategic scorecard; (4) role-specific, future-oriented leadership competencies; (5) the means to assess team fit; and (6) a winning integration process. Ignore even one of these hiring protocols and the risk of a mishire goes up appreciably. And if you think all this takes too much time ... don’t worry, you are likely to suddenly find yourself with plenty of time.

A leader with character goes even deeper. They have the emotional courage to hire people who are better than they are. “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” – Peter Drucker.

**Character is about caring –
caring enough to strive for sustainable
excellence in the hiring process.**

² It’s a mistake to assume that psychometric assessment supporting a hire decision at the leadership level is a predictor of success. At best, such instruments are a “leading indicator.” Their real value surfaces when the results are flexed against the immediate challenge and emerging culture of the hiring organization.



Aligns “the what” with “the why.” Character and purpose draw strength one from the other. History remembers William Wilberforce as a moving influence in the abolition of slavery within the British Empire. For those who knew him, it was a truly startling turn of events. Throughout his life he had always been viewed as a small and meek man. Those who knew him didn’t recognise the man who stood tall in parliament to passionately “preach” that ending the evil of slavery was a moral imperative. Transformed by an all-consuming purpose, Wilberforce became, in the words of a fellow parliamentarian, “a lion of a man.”





Terry Fox isn't widely known but in Canada he is a national hero. In 1980, aged 21, after having a leg amputated due to cancer, he embarked on a cross-Canada run to raise money for cancer research. For 143 days he ran a marathon a day – on only one leg. Sadly, after 5,373 kilometres (3,339 miles), Terry had to stop running. Cancer defeated him. He died in 1981. Terry was the very definition of “character.” All it needed was a driving resolve to bring it to the forefront. Fortunately, his spirit lives on. The annual event in his name – the Terry Fox Run – has raised over half a billion dollars.

Outstanding organizations have character too. There is one non-government agency that treats, in any one year, at least 16 million people – for free. Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) provides emergency medical humanitarian care around the world to people affected by conflict, epidemics, disasters or exclusion from healthcare. MSF teams provide assistance based on need, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion or political affiliation. They also speak out about the suffering they witness while carrying out their work. What draws, literally, some of the world's best medical professionals to work that pays only a small monthly stipend? They are drawn to an organization that has a compelling reason to be.

A major cancer hospital describes its mission as “To cure cancer in our lifetime.” A bionics company outlines its dominant cause as being to “Make the wheelchair redundant.” LEGO describes its aim as being “To inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow.” Patagonia's website is dominated by a resolute statement, “Earth is now our only shareholder.” Meanwhile, intention-driven investment funds have totally changed the capital market's landscape. Their overall theme is “Do well by doing good.”

Think of the purpose as the creation story – why the organization exists, its reason to be. A compelling cause can be a winning competitive advantage. But it has to be authentic. It has to capture what the business is actually doing! Not what you want to do or what you claim to be able to do. With discerning customers, if the reason to be turns out to be little more than a marketing exercise, you are harming the brand.

A lofty purpose that lacks credibility will quickly become a target for the cynics and malcontents within the informal organization. An aspirational purpose, similarly, might sound noble, but unless there is evidence that the organization is moving in that direction, it will have little emotional traction.



We live in a time of unprecedented change. The organization's driving force has to evolve with the enterprise. It has to thrive in real time. It needs to reflect: (1) shifts in societal priorities; (2) "noise" from the investment community; (3) the organization's emerging business model; (4) the emerging needs of the ideal customer; and (5) what the organization's top talent demands from their employer. Of course, the purpose is meaningless unless supported by the leadership character needed to align the organization's inspirational force with individual and team commitment. It doesn't matter how strong the plough is, you still need the right horses to pull it.

Character is about caring –
caring enough to connect the organization's
"what" with the "why."



Realises critical goals. The higher the position in the organization a leader attains, the greater the need to deliver results through the actions of others. Indeed, failure to deliver results overrides any possibility to orchestrate meaningful change. Paradoxically, delivering sustainable results isn't the outcome of a laser-like focus on "the numbers." The numbers are only the tip of the spear. And a spear without a strong shaft has little utility.

To consistently deliver results you have to move beyond doing things right ... and do the right things. Character is not simply about results but about displaying "leadership balance." Leadership balance, in turn, demands mastery in four domains, as outlined here (and see Figure one below):



Direction (the Head)

See the big picture

Strategic thinker

Market/branding savvy

Technology

(Cognitive intelligence)



Delivery (the Hand)

Commitment to the outcomes captured by the scorecard

Attract and retain top talent

Serve the customer

Collaborate with other teams

(Practical/kinetic intelligence)



Development (the Heart)

Listening

Coaching

Empower/grow the team

Orchestrate succession

(Interpersonal intelligence)



Day-to-day dialogue (the Spirit)

Asking great questions

Authenticity

Humility

Connect to virtual employees

(Intrapersonal intelligence)





The leader who shortchanges or pays scant attention to one of the domains outlined may succeed in the short term but they are building their reputation on shifting sand. Character is to recognise and deliver all of the attributes that make up leadership balance.

To the four dimensions of intelligence outlined we must add a fifth: ecological intelligence. Here we are describing a way to think and act that fully recognises the footprint we leave on the planet. A societal imperative our indigenous cousins have retained but that, since the birth of the Industrial Revolution, “civilised cultures” have foolishly chosen to set aside. In that a lack of ecological intelligence now amounts to an existential threat, we are describing a “must have” intelligence, a way to think and act that is wholly present in those who display character.

Decades of *learning by looking back* business school training, leadership heavily skewed to short-term shareholder value and the rationale for new technology dominated by “efficiency” underscore/emphasise the head and hand. The problem? What got us here won’t get us to where we need to be. Ever-increasing complexity, unparalleled uncertainty and the challenge of AI mean that, moving forward, a successful leader will, of necessity: (1) display unprecedented strategic reach; (2) consistently deliver operational excellence; (3) unlock and grow talent – individually and as a team; and (4) make authenticity, fairness, caring and being values-driven a non-negotiable business priority – all while reducing our footprint on the planet. The emphasis? Stakeholder value.

Character is about caring –
caring enough to employ the head, empower the hand,
engage the heart and enrich the spirit.



Ability – an extraordinary ability – to listen. Character is to speak to power. It's to challenge the status quo. It finds a home in tenacity, resolve and determination. In the face of adversity, it's to never, never give up. Underscoring all of that, however, is a core behaviour that's so important that if it isn't present the appearance of character amounts to little more than a manipulative façade. Character without mastery in listening is a sailboat without an accompanying wind. It might look good – but it isn't going anywhere.

We listen when we make an emotional commitment to be fully present – to be in the moment. We listen when we put a hold on likely interruptions and spend a few moments clearing the clutter from our mind. We listen when our self-talk moves to full volume with a message that emphasises, “The next few minutes are an invaluable learning opportunity.” We listen when we put the needs of others ahead of our own needs. If you are operating in virtual space, double down on each of these behaviours. If you are on Zoom, or some other video connection, set the scene for exemplary listening – take the clutter out of the background, avoid casting shadows on your face, adjust the camera to be near eye height. If needed, buy a stand for your laptop. When the camera is looking up at your neck and chin, you are emphasising what is probably your least attractive features.

Claude Debussy once remarked, “Music is the stuff between the notes.” Masterful listening implies “listening for” and not “listening to.” It means listening not just for what is said, but also for what is omitted. It means hearing the silence. It means interpreting the message in the space between the words. It means, when emphasis adds to the understanding, making the silence louder. It means, when faced with a tough advocate, forging the silence the way a blacksmith wields a hammer. It means being tuned into the subtleties of the speaker's body and the subtext in the language. The payoff? When we are fully engaged we





start to hear not just the speaker's intentions but the meaning behind what is being presented. And in that meaning we can start to understand the speaker's true intent and state of mind.

Professional rally and race car drivers do something intuitively (at a level of excellence) that the rest of us do only after a fashion. They understand that simultaneous use of our hands and our eyes (hand-eye coordination) is how we are naturally wired. They, however, take that capability to a whole new level, to the point that where they look is where the car steers – not a split second later – but, literally, in the moment. Leaders who are attentive listeners, in like manner, “tune in” all of their other senses. As a result, they are especially good at picking up subtle clues of disagreement.

Here we face another paradox. Everyday logic would suggest that “agreement” is a prerequisite of progress. This ignores the gift of disagreement. Conflict is an idea in the making. That is why diversity is so important. That's why, especially in this current environment, listening in the way you have always wanted to be listened to has the capacity to turn concern into the art of the possible.

Great listeners develop “peripheral awareness.” The message is important. But no less important is sensing how the message lands with everyone else in the room – virtual or otherwise. To listen is to be an active partner in the communication dance – with all the dancers. To listen is to be the master of both content and context. Listening is not exclusively a real-time experience. Mastery is to develop a “listening memory.” It is a memory that builds a pattern of understanding around what the speaker is passionate about, for therein lies untapped energy. It is a memory that builds understanding around what the speaker gets angry about, for therein lies insight into what the speaker fears most. It is a memory that builds awareness as to what the speaker seeks to avoid most, for therein lies insight into the speaker's capacity to lead. It is a memory that builds insight into the speaker's authentic-self, for therein lies their true path to mastery.

Character is about caring –
caring enough to listen in the way you have always
wanted to be listened to.



Commits to the organization's values. Values aren't rules or edicts – they give people permission to act. Rules amount to sand in the gears when it comes to agility. Rules come to the fore when values are missing. Organization culture was touched on earlier, but it's worth revisiting here. Culture is a dynamic system. Like any system, leave out a critical piece and the system is likely to fail. Go ask NASA.

Organization culture is anchored around four pillars:³ (1) Purpose – why we do what we do? (2) Diversity – the catalyst of innovation; (3) Brand – the promise made to customers; and (4) Speed – the only sustainable competitive advantage is how quickly the organization learns. Binding those pillars together, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts, embodies the organization's values. Purpose without values is a



³ In a tech company, technology would be a fifth pillar.



“why” without a “how.” Diversity without values is what makes much of “diversity” a numbers game. Brand without values amounts to manipulation. And speed without values is an accident waiting to happen. With reference to the latter, think of the dangers lurking in unbridled speed when introducing AI to how the business does business.

There are a good many things a leader is rightly charged with: strategy, results, developing the team and fulfilling the organization’s social responsibility being among the most prominent. And yet none of these can reach the level of excellence needed unless the culture supports and inspires those who have to make it all happen. Leadership is in no small measure, therefore, about bringing the culture to life.

Managing from the outside-in is the start of it, measurement is part of it, but commitment to the organization’s values is the heart of it. Character isn’t simply to live the organization’s values – it’s to emphasise them. It’s to challenge others who see the values as either transitional or optional.

It’s to ensure that our values aren’t what we aspire to ... but who we are. Think of the term “rock solid.”

Character is to constantly reinforce the bedrock of the organization’s culture (cultural pillars) such that the business is resilient enough to survive the inevitable social squalls, business storms and economic hurricanes. “When your values are clear, decision-making becomes easier.” – Roy Disney.

**Character is about caring –
caring enough to live the values
in every way, every day.**



To leave a legacy is an overriding priority. I spent a decade working closely with and coaching the late Sergio Marchionne.⁴ He delivered truly remarkable results and was a central figure, after the 2008 financial crisis, in salvaging the US auto business. His lasting theme? The true mark of a leader wasn't what they delivered during their tenure, but what they left behind. Their legacy. From my experience, those who bequeath a legacy do five things extraordinarily well.

- 1. Dream big dreams.** At the conclusion of his first Disney board meeting, Steve Jobs, who was silent up until that point, was asked for his input. His reply? "Dream bigger dreams."

If you are chasing the ordinary, if your goal is to be better than an organization on the other side of town, if you are a follower – you are not going to leave a legacy. If the organization's way to do things is to figure out what's not working



⁴ Chairman of CNH Industrial, CEO of Fiat Chrysler Automobiles, Chairman & CEO of FCA US LLC, Chairman & CEO of Ferrari, and Chairman of Maserati.



and then fix it – you are not going to leave a legacy. Even if you build on success and regularly introduce best practices – you are not going to leave a legacy.

Those who leave something lasting, dream big dreams. They don't simply want to be the best; they want to be better than the best. They want to excel. They want to soar. They want to be the standard against which everyone else is judged. If you don't reach for the stars, you will never sprinkle stardust.

- 2. Create a strong and agile culture.** Today's value proposition is tomorrow's commodity. Winning products become redundant. Even innovative ideas have a limited shelf life. What's still around long after those who built a great business? For good or bad, the organization's culture.

The founder's and/or CEO's leadership point of view, invariably, shapes the organization's culture. That's what leaders do. However, if those who wear the mantle of leadership see culture as a "we will get to it when we have time" kind of thing, they may appear to be in charge, but they are certainly not leading the charge.

- 3. Build great teams.** When history is written, success is often attributed to the lone hero battling all the odds. It doesn't happen that way. Michelangelo didn't paint the Sistine Chapel on his own; he had no fewer than 13 helpers. Frank Sinatra needed musical accompaniment. Lionel Messi needs someone to pass him the ball. And imagine the mass of people involved in getting Taylor Swift on stage. The reality? No leader can be better than the quality of the team that supports them.

It has been suggested that "leaders walk softly, but carry a big stick." If you're the team leader and members of the team are more informed and more experienced in their sphere of influence than you (as they almost certainly are), the only reason to carry a big stick is to beat yourself around the head with it when you forget that the team doesn't work for you – you work for them!

- 4. Are storytellers.** Building commitment, gaining buy-in isn't limited to what you think people need to know. It's ultimately about how you make them feel. Knowledge, information and know-how matter, but at the end of the day, they are game stakes. They are the attributes needed to deliver value, but they don't have a lot to do with leaving a legacy.



Taking it to the next level, reinventing possibility, going the extra mile means you have to get behind the varnished veneer of employee indifference. Regardless of level, employees are inundated with hundreds, if not thousands, of messages every day. Most are overtures to the wallet. The rest, for the most part, are an unnecessary and unwanted form of pollution.

To cut through the clutter you have to get people's attention. To get people on board, you have to touch an emotional chord. Leaders who take people where they would otherwise not go understand that they are in the emotional transportation business. They are storytellers.

5. Know when to step away. Know when to step away. To reinforce their legacy, leaders know when to walk away. They also know how to walk away.

Letting go is the one area where legacy leaders often falter, especially in the political arena. Winston Churchill should have retired when WWII came to a close. Margaret Thatcher hung on beyond her time. Ronald Reagan was a lame-duck president for much of his second period in office. Benito Mussolini would have been advised to call it a day five minutes after he figured out how to make the trains run on time – even before. And Joe Biden should never have opted for a second presidential term.

And as you reflect on your career, will you know when to let go? What footprints will you leave in the sand? What will your legacy be?

**Character is about caring –
caring enough to leave a legacy.**



Empowers the team. In describing the future, there is not much that can be said with certainty. Two central elements can be stated with conviction, however. One: as already outlined, what got you here won't get you to where you need to be. Two: the organization will be a team of teams.

Today is the fastest things have ever been and the slowest they will ever be. To match the speed of action needed means stripping out much of the cumbersome hierarchy that, in many organizations, is still established practice. Think: Flat, Fast, Focused, Flexible, and Fertile to new ideas. Think of the team as the basic building block of tomorrow's organization. Think of AI as a central hub that (1) shapes and supports





organizational design; (2) provokes new ideas and brings discipline to the strategy; (3) drives strategic implementation; (4) connects different teams – often in real time; (5) identifies even subtle shifts in the marketplace; and (6) moves products and services to the market ever faster. Think servant leadership. Recognise that servant leadership simply means that the leader works for the team.

Character is to care. We start to truly care about the team (display character) when, as a leader, we demonstrate the traits that follow:

- Frame how the team thinks and operates by aligning team behaviour with (1) the culture the organization needs to create; (2) the organization's values; (3) the business's driving purpose; (4) the delivery speed and strategic challenge of other key teams; and (5) the customer's emerging needs.
- Recognise that where uncertainty rules, readiness is the only game in town. Know that the first four letters in readiness spell READ.
- Hire with the emerging needs of the team in mind. Recognise that diversity is the handmaiden of innovation. Know also that when you add someone to the team, you have, essentially, created a new team.
- Make psychological safety an overriding and everyday priority.
- Translate the strategy into a compelling story.
- Establish and regularly revisit "team" success criteria – agreed protocols that define how those on the team are expected to behave.
- Regularly assess – results and team interaction – team performance. You can't manage what you don't measure! Act quickly on the results.
- Agree on both functional and team roles. From our own research we have found that there are six essential team roles: (1) Visionary – a dreamer with a deadline; (2) Explorer – visits new lands but does so with a critical eye on the financial implications; (3) Pioneer – an innovator who breaks a new path; (4) Warrior – no matter what the circumstances, always delivers; (5) Navigator – helps steer the team through the issues related to conflict, team process and team interaction; and (6) Maverick – challenges the way things are but doesn't just push back, brings new ideas to the table.

If one of these team roles is missing, the team's performance is marginalised. In the middle of the organization, team members may be able to deliver more



than one role. Not so for the top of the team, where a team role shortfall will likely equate to a dysfunctional team.

- Realise that in terms of work location, the people you need most will demand a degree of choice. In a hybrid environment, have regular one-on-one sessions with each team member. Coach the team. Move beyond “management by walking around.” It’s yesterday’s solution to a world that no longer exists. Learn to delegate. It’s an overlooked skill. Provide the resources (especially up-to-date technology) needed. Put trust-building at the centre of everything you do. Make coming to the office a joyful experience. Use in-house time together – ensuring that everyone on the team comes to the office on the same days – to cultivate curiosity, encourage difficult questions and foster collaboration. Tell people the truth as soon as you know it.
- Push decision-making as close to the customer/end user as possible.
- In addition to the essential role of coaching the team, train and encourage team members to coach each other. Instil leadership balance as the framework for coaching. (See earlier explanation of leadership balance.)
- At meetings, where possible, deliberately speak last.
- Actively work to create a successor.

Character is about caring –
caring enough to ensure that the team and
the needs of those on the team come before
the personal agenda of the team leader.



Resilience as a way of life. Character is both an action and a reaction. It's knowing how to bring about change and how to respond to the unexpected. Traditional thinking around resilience defines it as “absorbing change and bouncing back.” It portrays the human spirit as a kind of behavioural elastic band. It stretches and then, when the tension is released, goes back to where it was. In a steady state world “bouncing back” is an apt description.

Unfortunately, we don't live in a steady, consistent, unchanging world. Today's environment is marked by disruption; and where technology is involved, “discontinuous change” – “what was” is no more and “what's next” is happening too fast to be fully





understood. In any conversation around change, language isn't important – it's everything. With the scope and nature of change likely to become even more turbulent, resilience seen as a way to go back to the status quo isn't very helpful. Indeed, it's misleading.

A more relevant approach presents resilience as pushing to the edge, being comfortable with being uncomfortable, adapting to the new state, reflecting on the experience and developing new ways to behave. It's a dynamic rather than a static process. It's about leading and learning, not absorbing and then acting as before. Resilience means not only weathering the storm but being strengthened by it. Character, you can't win without it. And without resilience, character is an invaluable commodity with built-in early redundancy.

Accepting the plasticity of the brain, we can learn to become more resilient. There is a link, for example, between resilience and the research on positive psychology. Unfortunately, if you are overly anxious, risk-averse, trapped by yesterday's success, have difficulty facing adversity or are overwhelmed by life, resilience is spelt "resistance."

Character is about caring –
caring enough to ensure that to lead is to
fully understand specifically where and
how to become more resilient.



Conclusion

The black sheep can excel. Character isn't exclusively the prerogative of the gifted or those in positions of power. Ordinary people can do extraordinary things. Indeed, character arises in the most unexpected places. Albert Ernest Clifford Young was a 61-year-old Australian from Beech Forest, Victoria. A pig and sheep farmer from the bush, he became an Australian hero for his unexpected win of the inaugural 544-mile Sydney to Melbourne Ultramarathon in 1983.

The substantial prize attracted over a hundred elite runners from around the world. Young's only running experience was his daily run to and back from his local post office (ten miles away) and, when needed, rounding up his sheep. On both tasks he set forth wearing rubber gumboots – footwear that meant he ran with a decidedly shuffling trait. Considering the snakes and other dangers in the bush, it was probably a wise, day-to-day footwear choice. Because they rattled when he ran, he also had to take his teeth out.





At the time, it was accepted wisdom that elite athletes would run for about 18 hours and sleep for the other 6. How did Young do the impossible? He decided that he only needed a couple hours of sleep each night. He finished 10 hours ahead of the runner up. His time of 5 days, 15 hours and 4 minutes beat the record for running between Sydney and Melbourne by more than two days.

Young did have another secret – **CHARACTER**. He didn't run to win the prize. He wanted to show what an ordinary bloke like him living in the Australian bush could do. And as if to endorse that true character is never an expression of one's own selfish needs, Young shared the prize money with all of the athletes who finished.

As we enter an AI-dominated world where ambiguity and uncertainty rule, talent comes to the fore. That's not the whole picture, however.

Talent will get you to the start line but, in turbulent times, it takes character to win.

Character is about caring –
caring enough to know that making a difference
is far more important than the prize money.



John O. Burdett

*“Character
matters – and
when hiring for
a key leadership
role it matters
a lot.”*

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

