

Leadership, Conflict and Character Analysis

By Steve Hanamura



Expert Forum



In July I began writing about the intersection between leadership, conflict and character. There were two main drivers for undertaking this project. First I was frustrated with the political processes that had taken place in 2008 and again in 2012. Campaign slanders and the inability to get things done were pushing me to ask the question why we can't do something about this process.

During our first entry on this topic one person asked the question "What is the business connection between politics and what we do as leaders of inclusion and diversity?" It took a long time for me to come up with a response, but here it is: There has been a demise in leadership not only in politics, but also government, on Wall Street and in our educational institutions. We say in diversity and inclusion that we want people to bring their whole selves to the workplace. From my vantage point, this cannot happen unless people feel valued for who they are and what they think.

The second driver for embarking on this project was influenced by three of the identity groups I am a part of - my Asian ethnicity, my blindness and my Christian faith. In all three of these domains I have experienced being discounted and have witnessed this happening to others in their various identity groups. I realized with great passion that the issues that really need to be addressed were around leadership, conflict and character. In other words it impacts business as well.

I began this process by first listing three assumptions from which to work:

1. There has been a decline in effective leadership in the United States within the past fifty or sixty years.
2. As a country we seem to be unable to engage in civil conversations around the issue of difference.
3. Leaders today are driven by greed, power and money.
- 4.

I had hoped to interview some high profile people but was unable to connect with people who could provide their thoughts on this matter. Then it occurred to me that I know lots of people both personally and professionally who work, live and think differently, not only from me, but from one another. I then set out to interview twenty-three people who differed theologically, racially, ethnically, politically, spiritually and in various workplace sectors (education, government, corporate). I don't even know if they could be in the same room and talk with one another with civility. I would like to think that they could and that is why I chose them. These people ranged in age from 50 to 86 years old.

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I asked all twenty-three people to respond to the following questions:

1. What is your definition of character?
2. Who was most influential in your life in helping you to develop character?
3. What place or influence does adversity have in helping you develop character?
4. Would you agree that character should precede being a good leader?
Explain
5. How did we get to where we are in the world today? In other words, is there a decline in effective leadership?
6. Describe your inner core that guides and develops who you have become.
7. What would those who know you say about your strengths, contributions, and limitations?

The responses to the assumption and question regarding decline in leadership were all over the map. They ranged in scope from agreeing that there has been a decline to stating that leadership today is more complicated. I found it significant that those who said there is a decline in leadership are Caucasian and come from a fairly conservative orientation. Two African Americans said they didn't think there has been a decline in leadership but that the issues of today are more complicated. Furthermore they felt like character in some cases was formed by having to react to crisis situations which helped develop who they have become as leaders. Other respondents of color who also felt there has been no decline said that while the United States has good documents in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, they have worked better for some than others.

I found that my current thinking was stretched to reframe what I think about character preceding leadership. In some cases I still believe that good character is the key to helping good leadership to occur. However I've also been stretched to think that we learn more about someone's character in observing how they respond in the moment of crisis.

I feel less frustrated than I did in 2008 even though the things that bothered me then haven't changed. Politicians still fight with one another without reaching resolve. In many places we still are not able to have civil conversations. What has changed, though, is that I am encouraged by interviewing twenty-three different people, who still want to operate from tenants like:

- Doing the right thing
- Have a strong moral and ethical base from which to work
- Care about the plight of others beyond oneself

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Everyone interviewed knew themselves well enough to identify strengths, weaknesses and contributions in their world. I have a sense of hope that even though we have a lot of negativity and strife, there are still good people who want to make things better. The challenge now is to get these good people into positions where institutional structures and systems can be put into place that would forward the well-being of all people regardless of their ethnicities, religious backgrounds and the like.

I think we can no longer separate our business selves from our personal selves and so I want to suggest some steps to becoming a pro-active leader:

- Create a safe environment so people can engage in truthful conversations
- Arm yourselves culturally to know how to approach people who are different from you
- Determine what behaviors appear to be right or wrong; if you see a "wrong" then work to create policies and procedures that will remedy the situation

A true leader is pro-active in nature and will fill in the blanks where policies and procedures do not exist. Their efforts will not be free of conflict with many opportunities for character development.