



# Continuing the Leadership Quest: Character

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As we continue our quest to develop leadership qualities and ensure that we, as safety professionals, are an integral part of the leadership teams within our respective organizations, the need to understand and explore character comes to the forefront.

General H. Norman Schwarzkopf knows the significance of character. "Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character," he says. "But if you must be without one, be without strategy."

Webster defines character as essential quality; moral constitution; moral excellence and firmness; self-discipline; fortitude and a good reputation. Character is about always aligning your words and actions. As safety professionals we are sometimes put into adversarial roles where the choice is compromise or character. The good news is that every time we choose character to guide us through, we become stronger. The better news is that we have saved lives and reduced the suffering of many of our workers by not compromising our core values.

I once heard it said that character comes by building a firm foundation out of the bricks thrown by critics. What a great statement! Character is the foundation on which we build our individual lives. It is also a personal choice. We develop our character when we stand firm in the face of adversity, when we decide to stand under the weight of truth and decide to pay the price for what is right. It is not easy, but it is worth the effort.

Nobel prize-winning author Alexander Solzhenitsyn once noted, "The meaning of earthly existing lies not as we have grown used to thinking—in prospering—but in the development of the soul." Character is a reflection of our soul and we can never rise above the limitations of our character.

In his book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, John Maxwell writes about the "law of solid ground." One of the basic messages is that trust is the very core of character. If we are going to serve as leaders, then we must have the trust of our followers. Character enables trust to exist and makes being a leader possible.

Character conveys the message of consistency. It means living out established values every single day. It is called "walking the talk." But it does not mean that you have to treat everyone the same. Different things motivate different people. A leader needs to understand how to deal with multiple constituents and learn what drives individuals to become extraordinary. It is the consistency of staying within the boundaries of our values.

Character is about integrity. Integrity is the map that leads us on our daily journey. Image is what we appear to be on the outside; integrity is what we really are. A well-known and highly recommended speaker submitted a demo tape to a group looking for a keynote speaker. The speaker's presentation was sprinkled with off-color words and innuendos. When the group contacted him and told him that his presentation was not appropriate, he immediately replied that he could cut out the off-color material. They informed him that he did not understand. They did not want him to change his material; they wanted someone who did not put that kind of material in to begin with. The group had integrity. Integrity is being authentic. Maxwell states, "Integrity allows us to predetermine what we will be regardless of circumstances, persons involved or the places of our testing."

In the game of life, character and integrity are the umpires that help make critical calls. As we move forward in our quest to be better leaders in the safety profession, keep in mind that character and integrity are things that we have total control over; we determine what our character will be. Character is the force that helps propel us forward in times of critical decision making. It is about being forthright in admitting errors of judgment and putting forth what is best for the people and organization. As Socrates reminds us, "The first key to greatness is to be in reality what we appear to be."



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