

Six things we have learned about building character

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1 Character is more than a value system.

The difference between “virtues” and “values” has largely been lost in our society today. Virtues are moral absolutes — standards of behavior that should be fixed and universally understood and accepted. Virtues are things like honesty, responsibility and diligence. There should be no argument or debate about virtues. Virtues are important in any society or culture.

Values, on the other hand, are shared beliefs and preferences. They can be good or bad. Even street gangs have “values.” Some companies value confrontation, even if it hurts the feelings or self-respect of others. Some companies value winning at any cost.

The key to building character in a business organization is to create a value system based on virtues. That’s what we have tried to do at EDG Inc.

Since 1996, EDG has sponsored a formal character building program to help employees understand, support and encourage character building traits in themselves and their co-workers. Here are some things we’ve learned about succeeding in this critically important endeavor.

2 Character building starts at the top

Building character is not something that can be delegated. It starts at the top and must touch every person in the company equally. All employees have to accept character building as being important. It is the responsibility of every employee to learn what character is, and help develop ways to improve it.

EDG was one of the first corporate customers to sign up for a program called Character First! developed by the Character Training Institute in Oklahoma City. We

have participated continuously in that program for more than ten years now. There are other character building programs available to businesses and organizations, but we have stayed with Character First! because it works for us.

It’s more than just staying with a program, though. The top managers of our company have committed their time, energy and resources to making Character First! ubiquitous throughout the company. They talk about it in group meetings. They write about it in communications to other employees. They participate in training sessions. And they encourage new employees to find out about it.

Building character is a never ending journey with a very fragile passenger. If you become distracted, you can fall from the path quickly. In order to achieve success, managers have to make sure the focus on character building is non-stop and highly visible.

3 Character building takes time

You shouldn’t expect overnight results with a character building program. It’s not something you can pick up in a 2-day seminar. Changing behaviors is a slow process, one that requires constant reinforcement and practice.

We decided to take the 49 character qualities from the Character First! program (see Figure 1) and deal with them one at a time in monthly meetings at each of our offices. It takes FOUR YEARS to work your way through the entire list.

It’s not that we wait four years to reveal the whole program to employees — there are introductory videos and pocket cards outlining the program’s overall scope and the

Give the Edge to EDG



49 character qualities. But by stretching it out over an extended period and treating each virtue individually, we demonstrate that ALL character qualities are important. And we emphasize the on-going nature of our commitment.

4 Reward character building behavior

The most effective way to change organizational behavior is to recognize and celebrate the kind of behavior you want. Loudly and frequently. In fact, we believe one of the most important keys to employee development and satisfaction is provided through public praise.

At each of our monthly Character First! meetings, we present an award to someone who has exhibited the character quality that will be examined that month. If the attribute is “creativity,” we select someone from each of our five offices who is creative, and we spotlight that virtue.

Additionally, each EDG employee is recognized annually on his or her anniversary date for demonstration of a particular character trait. The employee’s supervisor makes this observation at a monthly meeting of all employees in that office.

When employees receive their annual performance appraisals, they get feedback on which of the 49 character qualities are strengths for them, and which might need some extra developmental effort. Because there are so many qualities in the Character First! program, we do not score each one individually, but confine our discussion to strengths and weaknesses.

5 Hire for character, train for skills

When drafting athletes for sports teams, the question frequently arises, “Should we take the best people for positions that are weak, or should we draft the best overall athletes and train them to excel at one or more positions?”

That’s an easy one for us when you consider our emphasis on character. EDG is primarily concerned with recruiting and hiring persons of high moral strength and character. We feel those people will learn the required engineering

and management skills faster, and will ultimately deliver better service to our customers over the long run.

Of course, we search for individuals with the appropriate education, experience and training, but character is always the tie-breaker.

6 Character building is not a benevolent exercise

There’s nothing wrong with doing good for good’s sake, but we can trace many tangible benefits to our character building program. Job satisfaction, as reported through periodic employee surveys, went up immediately when we started the program and has continued to rise. Employees say that Character First! is the single best thing about working at EDG.

Beyond job satisfaction, however, there are many other benefits that have been observed. Turnover rates are down. Absenteeism has decreased since starting the character building program. Recruitment costs are minimized, because candidates are profoundly influenced by talking to current employees. And Worker Compensation costs have dropped, even though our employee count has risen.

When employees of our New Orleans (Metairie) office were hard-hit by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, there was no doubt in their minds that EDG would stand behind them. Not only did the company help with relocation and temporary living expenses, but other employees quickly came forward with donated clothing and household goods. Some even opened their homes to displaced employees.

A guide for decision making

More than anything else, character building provides a moral compass that guides decision making at every level. Character-based decisions cannot be second guessed. If your actions are dictated by a value system supported by universally accepted virtues, there can be no argument or debate. Doing the right thing is always right, no matter what.

As many EDG employees like to say, “It’s even right when no one is watching.” And that’s the best assurance of all.

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Figure 1: Character Qualities

Wisdom vs. Natural Inclinations

Seeing and responding to life situations from a larger frame of reference.

Discernment vs. Judgment

The ability to understand the deeper reason as to why things happen.

Faith vs. Presumption

Picturing what my authority intends to do in a given situation and acting in harmony with it.

Discretion vs. Simplemindedness

The ability to avoid words, actions, and attitudes that could result in undesirable consequences.

Love vs. Selfishness

Giving to others' basic needs without personal reward as my motive.

Creativity vs. Underachievement

Approaching a need, a task, or an idea from a new perspective.

Enthusiasm vs. Apathy

Expressing with my spirit the joy of my soul.

Self-Control vs. Self-Indulgence

Rejecting my own desires and doing what is right in all areas of my life.

Respectfulness vs. Disrespect

Awareness of how every person and event in my life can be used to produce character in me.

Diligence vs. Slothfulness

Investing all my energy to complete the tasks that are assigned to me.

Thoroughness vs. Incompleteness

Knowing what factors, if neglected, will diminish the effectiveness of my work or words.

Dependability vs. Inconsistency

Fulfilling what I consented to do, even if it means unexpected sacrifice.

Security vs. Anxiety

Structuring my life around that which is eternal and cannot be destroyed or taken away.

Patience vs. Restlessness

Accepting a difficult situation without giving my authority a deadline to remove it.

Alertness vs. Unawareness

Being aware of that which is around me so I can have the right responses.

Hospitality vs. Loneliness

Cheerfully sharing food, shelter and spiritual refreshment with those around me.

Generosity vs. Stinginess

Realizing that I am a steward of all I have and using it for the best purposes.

Joyfulness vs. Self-Pity

The spontaneous enthusiasm of my spirit when my soul is in fellowship with all those around me.

Flexibility vs. Resistance

Not setting my affections on ideas or plans that could be changed by my authority.

Availability vs. Self-Centeredness

Making my own schedule and priorities secondary to the wishes of those I am serving.

Endurance vs. Giving Up

The inward strength to withstand stress to accomplish the best.

Orderliness vs. Disorganization

Arranging myself and my surroundings to achieve the greatest efficiency.

Initiative vs. Unresponsiveness

Recognizing and doing what needs to be done before being asked to do it.

Responsibility vs. Unreliability

Knowing and doing what both those in authority and others are expecting of me.

Decisiveness vs. Double mindedness

The ability to finalize difficult decisions based on what will make my authority successful.

Determination vs. Faintheartedness

Purposing to accomplish the goals I am given in the allotted time regardless of the opposition.

Loyalty vs. Unfaithfulness

Using difficult times to demonstrate my commitment to those to whom I have been asked to serve.

Attentiveness vs. Unconcern

Showing the worth of a person by giving full concentration to his words.

Sensitivity vs. Callousness

Exercising my senses so I can perceive the true spirit and emotions of those around me.

Justice vs. Fairness

Personal responsibility to all the laws governed by my actions.

Compassion vs. Indifference

Investing whatever is necessary to heal the hurts of others.

Gentleness vs. Harshness

Showing personal care and concern in meeting the needs of others.

Deference vs. Rudeness

Limiting my freedom in order not to offend the tastes of those whom I have been asked to serve.

Meekness vs. Anger

Yielding my personal rights and expectations with a desire to serve.

Truthfulness vs. Deception

Earning future trust by accurately reporting past facts.

Obedience vs. Willfulness

Cheerfully carrying out the directions and the wishes of those who are responsible for me.

Sincerity vs. Hypocrisy

Eagerness to do what is right with transparent motives.

Virtue vs. Impurity

The moral excellence and purity of spirit that radiate from my life as I do what is right.

Boldness vs. Fearlessness

Confidence that what I have to say or do is true, right and just in the sight of those in authority.

Forgiveness vs. Rejection

Clearing the record of those who have wronged me and bearing no grudge against them.

Persuasive vs. Contentiousness

Guiding vital truths around another's mental roadblocks.

Resourcefulness vs. Wastefulness

Finding practical uses for that which others would overlook or discard.

Thriftiness vs. Extravagance

Not letting myself or others spend unnecessarily.

Contentment vs. Covetousness

Realizing that I already have everything I need for my present happiness.

Punctuality vs. Tardiness

Being ready to begin each task at the appointed time.

Tolerance vs. Prejudice

Acceptance of others as unique expressions of specific character qualities in varying degrees of maturity.

Cautiousness vs. Rashness

Knowing how important right timing is in accomplishing right actions.

Gratefulness vs. Unthankfulness

Letting others know by my words and actions how they have benefited my life.