



Center on Principles by Stephen R. Covey

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February 1994

Real character development begins with the humble recognition that we are not in charge, that principles ultimately govern. I don't talk much about ethics and values because to me those words imply situational behaviors, subjective beliefs, social mores, cultural norms, or relative truths. I prefer to talk about universal principles and natural laws that are more absolute. You may think that it's just a matter of semantics and that when most people talk about values they really mean these universal principles. But I see a clear difference between principles and values. Hitler was value-driven; Saddam Hussein is value-driven. Every person and organization is driven by what they value, but they aren't necessarily ethical or principle-centered.

The Humility of Principles

The key to quality of life is to be centered on principles. We're not in control; principles are in control. We're arrogant when we think we are in control. Yes, we may control our actions, but not the consequences of our actions. Those are controlled by principles, by natural laws. Building character and creating quality of life is a function of aligning our beliefs and behaviors with universal principles. These principles are impersonal, external, factual, objective, and self-evident. They operate regardless of our awareness of them, or our obedience to them.

If your current lifestyle is not in alignment with these principles, then you might trade a value-based map for a principle-centered compass. When you recognize that external verities and realities ultimately govern, you might willingly subordinate your values to them and align your roles and goals, plans, and activities with them. But doing so often takes a crisis: your company's downsizing; your job's on the line; your relationship with the boss goes sour; you lose a major account; your marriage is threatened; your financial problems peak; or you're told you have just a few months to live. In the absence of such a catalytic crisis, we tend to live in numbed complacency so busy doing good, easy, or routine things that we don't even stop to ask ourselves if we're doing what really matters. The good, then, becomes the enemy of the best.

Humility is the mother of all virtues: the humble in spirit progress and are blessed because they willingly submit to higher powers and try to live in harmony with natural laws and universal principles. Courage is the father of all virtues; we need great courage to lead our lives by correct principles and to have integrity in the moment of choice. When we set up our own self-generated or socially-validated value systems and then develop our missions and goals based on what we value, we tend to become laws unto ourselves, proud and independent. Pride hopes to impress; humility seeks to bless. Just because we value a thing doesn't mean that having it will enhance our quality of life. No "quality movement" in government, business, or education will succeed unless based on "true north" principles. And yet we see leaders who cling to their current style based on self-selected values and bad habits even as their "ship" is sinking when they could be floating safely on the life raft of principles.

Nothing sinks people faster in their careers than arrogance. Arrogance shouts "I know best." In the uniform of arrogance, we fumble and falter — pride comes and goes before the fall. But dressed in humility, we make progress. As the character Indiana Jones learned in *The Last Crusade*, "The penitent man will pass." In pride, we often sow one thing and expect to reap another. Many of our paradigms and the processes and habits that grow out of them never produce the results we expect because they are based on illusions, advertising slogans, program-of-the-month training, and personality-based success strategies. Quality of life can't grow out of illusion. So how do we align our lives with "true north" realities that govern quality of life?

Four Human Endowments

As human beings, we have four unique endowments: self-awareness, conscience, independent will, and creative imagination that not only separate us from the animal world, but also help us to distinguish between reality and illusion, to transform the clock into a compass, and to align our lives with the extrinsic realities that govern quality of life. Self-awareness enables us to examine our paradigms, to look at our glasses as well as through them, to think about our thoughts, to become aware of the psychic programs that are in us, and to enlarge the separation between stimulus and response. Self-aware, we can take responsibility for reprogramming or rescripting ourselves out of the stimulus-response mode. Many movements in psychology, education, and training are focused on an enlarged self-consciousness. Most popular self-help literature also focuses upon this capacity. Self-awareness, however, is only one of our unique endowments. Conscience puts us in touch with something within us even deeper than our thoughts and something outside us more reliable than our values. It connects us with the wisdom of the ages and the wisdom of the heart. It's an internal guidance system that allows us to sense when we act or even contemplate acting in a way that's contrary to our deepest values and "true north" principles. Conscience is universal. By helping companies and individuals develop mission statements, I have learned that what is most personal is most general. No matter what people's religions, cultures, or

backgrounds are, their mission statements all deal with the same basic human needs to live (physical and financial), to love (social), to learn (educational), and to leave a legacy (spiritual).

Independent will is our capacity to act, the power to transcend our paradigms, to swim upstream, to re-write our scripts, to act based on principles rather than reacting based on emotions, moods, or circumstances. While environmental or genetic influences may be very powerful, they do not control us. We're not victims. We're not the product of our past. We are the product of our choices. We are "response-able," meaning we are able to choose our response. This power to choose is a reflection of our independent will. Creative imagination empowers us to create beyond our present reality. It enables us to write personal mission statements, set goals, plan meetings, or visualize ourselves living our mission statements even in the most challenging circumstances. We can imagine any scenario we want for the future. If our imagination has to go through the straightjacket of our memory, what is imagination for? Memory is limited. It's finite; it deals with the past. Imagination is infinite; it deals with the present and the future, with potentiality, with vision and mission and goals with anything that is not now but can be. The man-on-the-street approach to success is to work harder, to give it the "old college try." But unless willpower is matched with creative imagination, these efforts will be weak and ineffective.

Nurturing Our Unique Gifts

Enhancing these endowments requires us to nurture and exercise them continuously. Sharpening the saw once a week or once a month just isn't enough. It's too superficial. It's like a meal. Yesterday's meal will not satisfy today's hunger. Last Sunday's big meal won't prepare me for this Thursday's ethical challenge. I will be much better prepared if I meditate every morning and visualize myself dealing with that challenge with authenticity, openness, honesty, and with as much wisdom as I can bring to bear on it.

Here are four ways to nurture your unique endowments:

1. **Nurture self-awareness by keeping a personal journal.** Keeping a personal journal — a daily in-depth analysis and evaluation of your experiences — is a high-leverage activity that increases self-awareness and enhances all the endowments and the synergy among them.
2. **Educate your conscience by learning, listening, and responding.** Most of us work and live in environments that are rather hostile to the development of conscience. To hear the conscience clearly often requires us to be reflective or meditative, a condition we rarely choose or find. We're inundated by activity, noise, conditioning, media messages, and flawed paradigms that dull our sensitivity to that quiet inner voice that would teach us of "true north" principles and our own degree of congruency with them. I've heard executives say that they can't win this battle of conscience because expediencies require lies, cover-ups, deceit, or game playing. "That's just part of the job," they say. I disagree. I think such rationalization undermines trust within their cultures. If you have

back-room manipulation and bad mouthing, you will have a low-trust culture. A life of total integrity is the only one worth striving for. Granted, it's a struggle. Some trusted advisors, PR agents, accountants, and legal counselors might say, "This will be political suicide," or "This will be bad for our image, and so let's cover up or lie." You have to look at each case on its own merit. No case is black and white. It takes real judgment to know what you should do. You may feel that you operate "between a rock and a hard place." Still, with a well-educated conscience or internal compass, you will rarely, if ever, be in a situation where you only have one bad option. You will always have choices. If you wisely exercise your unique endowments, some moral option will be open to you. So much depends on how well you educate your conscience, your internal compass. When my kids were in athletics, they paid the price to get their bodies coordinated with their minds. You've got to do the same with your own conscience regularly. The more internal uncertainty you feel, the larger the grey areas will be. You will always have some grey areas, particularly at the extremity of your education and experience. And to grow, you need to go to that extremity and learn to make those choices based on what you honestly believe to be the right thing to do.

3. **Nurture independent will by making and keeping promises.** One of the best ways to strengthen our independent will is to make and keep promises. Each time we do, we make deposits in our personal integrity account the amount of trust we have in ourselves, in our ability to walk our talk. To build personal integrity, start by making and keeping small promises. Take it a step and a day at a time.
4. **Develop creative imagination through visualization.** Visualization, a high-leverage mental exercise used by world-class athletes and performers, may also be used to improve your quality of life. For example, you might visualize yourself in some circumstance that would normally create discomfort or pain. In your mind's eye, instead of seeing yourself react as you normally do, see yourself acting on the basis of the principles and values in your mission statement. The best way to predict your future is to create it.

Roots Yield Fruits

With the humility that comes from being principle-centered, we can better learn from the past, have hope for the future, and act with confidence, not arrogance, in the present. Arrogance is the lack of self-awareness; blindness; an illusion; a false form of self-confidence; and a false sense that we're somehow above the laws of life. Real confidence is anchored in a quiet assurance that if we act based on principles, we will produce quality-of-life results. It's confidence born of character and competence. Our security is not based on our possessions, positions, credentials, or on comparisons with others; rather, it flows from our own integrity to "true north" principles. I confess that I struggle with total integrity and do not always "walk my talk." I find that it's easier to talk and teach than to practice what I preach. I've come to realize that I must commit to having total integrity to be integrated around a set of correct principles. I've observed that if people never get centered on principles at some time in their lives, they

will take the expedient political-social path to success and let their ethics be defined by the situation. They will say, "business is business," meaning they play the game by their own rules. They may even rationalize major transgressions in the name of business, in spite of having a lofty mission statement.

Only by centering on "timeless" principles and then living by them can we enjoy sustained moral, physical, social, and financial wellness.