
Four Character-Building Habits

by Barry Koren, AIA, PhD



What you are shouting so loud in my ears I cannot hear what you say"...Emerson

I told you about the shy young aviator who learned how to make better eye contact by checking out the color of the person's eyes (in the 6'96 issue.) This technique, and others, can enhance your communication with someone. It can help you laugh and connect with another and can increase your confidence that you understand each other. Techniques such as this one turn sour, however, when you try to manipulate or control someone in an unprincipled way.

Eye contact came up again this morning, but this time with a professional salesman. Gerry had just beat me in a tennis match, and asked what I was going to do the rest of the day. When I told him that I would be writing this article, he told me his secret to his sales success. He said "I look people in the eye. I treat them pretty well. And I do pretty well."

I got a glimmer of Gerry's respect for the people he serves. His respect seemed to be an integral part of him, rather than merely a technique that he was practicing, like a tennis stroke.

What's this respect about? I think it's about personal character. It's about living in harmony with basic principles of fairness, integrity, and honesty. It's the habit of keeping promises, being courageous, and being genuinely considerate. These age-old principles come from ancient wisdom. They also come from common-sense business practices.

We tend to trust, and do business with, people who live by these principles, and distrust people who don't. Except out of desperation, who would want to do business with a smiling swindler? A greedy lawyer? A pushy real estate broker? This tendency to trust people with principles has probably always been the case and isn't going to change tomorrow, no matter how much else changes.

For those who want to consider their character, it means going back beyond job and career to something more fundamental. Back to the essence of who you are as a person.

A way to approach this personal work is by becoming more aware of your habits. And then practicing or adapting good ones and dropping bad ones. The first four of Steven Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People might be good candidates to consider.

Habit #1 is to be proactive. This means recognizing that between a

stimulant and my response to it, I have choice. For the person who has not taken on that responsibility, it is difficult to recognize that "I am who I am today because of the choices I made yesterday." Once I believe this, I am free to work from the inside out and say "I choose today so I can be who I want to be tomorrow." I can choose to educate and enhance my conscience by taking in positive experiences--seeking out positive friends, reading inspiring material, thinking and living nobly--and consciously choosing to limit negative ones. I can choose not to be bombarded by the cynicism of the mass media. This sifting process enhances my ability to make wise choices. It also nourishes the enthusiasm that I use in assertively and optimistically marketing engineering services.

Habit #2 is to begin a task with my purpose in mind. This is a personal leadership question. What do I want to accomplish? What is the right thing to do?

At our block party last Saturday, a neighbor and I mused about what we would do if we could do anything in the world that we wanted and resources were unlimited. First he said that he'd go mountain climbing. Then his creativity soared. He said that he would build a time machine and go back to the Inquisition. Then he thought some more and said that he'd build a giant school that would get rid of poverty on the west side of Chicago. And then...just then he got pulled away by his three-year-old who had gotten hungry.

Well, here are some areas that you might use to explore purposes:

- Financial
- Physical
- Mental
- Career
- Recreational

Pick a purpose that would have the biggest positive impact on the rest of your life. For instance, having your life in order--including having financial resources to fall back on in emergencies--makes it a hell of a lot easier to be true to your character and not be in the desperate position of having to decide between survival and what you believe to be the right thing to do.

Once I know my purpose, say to save 5% of my income, I can then follow with a management question--How can I accomplish this?

Habit #3 is putting first things first. This is the personal management habit of focusing on the most important item. If getting my finances in

order is my crucial purpose, and I want to save 5% of my income, one of the first things I need to do is to collaborate with my wife to find out whether she might share this goal.

Habit #4 is thinking and visualizing win/win. My cohorts and I can all succeed. Your gain can be my gain, too. This habit is tied to an abundance mentality. It assumes unlimited possibilities for interaction, growth, and development. It opens up unthought-of possibilities. It enables me to share my personal joy with others.

With these four character-building habits clicking away in your life, it's easy and fun to do what my tennis friend does--look people in the eye, treat them well, and do pretty well.

And now I have a question for you. Is there room for improvement in your firm's services? Are there any actions you can take now? By commenting, please let all of us know your reactions, or if you have any stories, news, or marketing

tips that you want to share.

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