Module 4

Read Ahead

Character and Ethics
Module 4: Character and Ethics

Objectives

After attending the training in Module 4, participants will be able to:

- know the definition and proper behaviors of character.
- identify why character is important in leading others.
- know the positive outcomes from showing character.
- know the five principles for developing character.

Definition of Character

Character is the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual. As the foundation of leadership, it can be described as a combination of moral maturity and commitment to doing the right thing regardless of the personal cost. It involves the will to make decisions and take actions according to established values and principles rather than urges, whims, or impulses. A short definition of character is that it is what we do when no one else is watching because we are committed to doing the right thing.

We often encounter moral and ethical issues in our day to day life. Sometimes the words “morals” and “ethics” are used interchangeably with “character.” For the sake of understanding, the definitions of words we typically use are as follows.

- “Character” is derived from a Greek word “Ethos,” which means the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a community.
- “Ethics” is derived from a Greek word “Ethikos,” which means character.
- “Morals” is derived from a Greek word “Mos,” which means custom.

The field of ethics involves philosophical study of the moral value of human conduct and of the rules and principles that ought to govern it. Personal ethics are related to character and deal with the responsibilities that come with a role. Whether in a professional position or a place in society, ethics reflect an expectation of actions, while character is a way of life. We all have roles and ethical codes we are expected to follow. Ethics govern an individual’s conduct in a particular role and usually focus on how the actions of that individual may impact others, especially in regard to responsibilities.

There is often a hierarchy of responsibilities called ethical priorities. Primarily, we are responsible to the public in general. Second, we are responsible to the client. In our case, this is the user—not necessarily the public as a whole but the individuals who interact with us through the facilities and services we provide. Third, we are responsible to our profession. Many of you are engineers or you may have another
profession, but we are all ALDOT employees and have a duty to the Department and the State. Finally, individuals have personal interests. Once you have covered your responsibility to these first three priorities, then you can look after yourself.

There are a variety of ethical tests you can apply to a situation to help you decide if you should move forward. They range from “Is it right?” or “Is it legal?” to “Would I be proud if this decision were on the front page of the paper?” to “What would my wise aunt or uncle do?” Your particular profession will most likely also have a set of established ethical standards from which to work.

In this Module, the words “character” and “ethics” might be used interchangeably. “Character” will be used for the most part and is intended to encompass our ethics and morals as defined in the society in which we live—Alabama and the United States.

**Why It Is Important for Leaders to Have Character**

Learning about character is a good way to launch your leadership development journey because character can become the foundation upon which you build other personality traits and management skills. The following statements underscore why character is necessary in order to proceed further on your journey:

- Character is the foundation of leadership; it builds trust.
- People with character are usually effective influencers. On the other hand, people of low character are not likely to have influence or inspire others to take action.
- Character enables high standards and high performance.
- Character produces a solid foundation for leadership, not just an image.
- Character is not part time. This means living it before leading others.
- Character helps a leader be credible, not clever.

**Character Erosion in America in the 21st Century**

There are serious concerns about the eroding morals of children in the United States. Cheating patterns were reported in several age groups by Education Portal in June 2011. The following conclusions were drawn from their report:

- Cheating typically begins in middle school.
- Nine out of ten middle school students copied someone else’s homework; two-thirds said they had cheated on exams.
- Cheating most often occurred in science and math classes.
- Seventy-five to ninety-eight percent of college students surveyed annually admitted to cheating at some point in their academic careers.
The concerns do not stop with the children. As far as working adults in the United States are concerned, the National Business Ethics Survey® for 2013 reported this disturbing news:

- A strong majority (60 percent) of misconduct is attributable to individuals who hold some level of management responsibility. Nearly a quarter (24 percent) of observed misdeeds involved senior managers. If allowed to persist, rule-breaking by managers bodes ill for ethics in our culture because managers set the tone for everyone else.
- A significant amount of misconduct occurs on a continuing basis, and about 12 percent of it takes place company-wide.
- In 2013, the percentage of workers who reported misconduct they observed had stalled. This data is troubling because fear of retaliation is among the biggest deterrents to reporting, and when workers stop reporting misconduct, the door opens to more misconduct down the road.
- The rate of retaliation remains alarmingly high, at 12 percent. That works out to more than six million workers in private-sector companies alone who experienced some form of retribution because they filed reports about misconduct on the job. When asked why they kept quiet, more than one-third (34 percent) of those who declined to report said they feared payback from senior leadership.
- It turns out that workers who feel proud of where they work and believe they have influence in how the company operates have a stronger commitment to good ethics.
- Trust and transparency also make a difference. Workers (72 percent) who believe management communicates honestly and openly are less likely to break rules and more likely to report bad behavior when they see it.

These facts indicate a pressing need to rebuild the character of our people. Someone must make a difference; someone must model character and ethical behavior. If you are interested in improving your leadership skills, start with improving your character. Character cannot be taught by someone who has not embraced it and whose life does not illustrate it. Nor can it be practiced part time—others will see through that.

On an encouraging note, the Ethics Resource Center also reported the following conclusions in the National Business Ethics Survey® for 2013.

- Business organizations’ deep and long standing investment in ethics training is paying dividends and may be fostering a fundamental change in worker behavior. Training rose from 74 percent to 81 percent between 2011 and 2013.
- Two-thirds of companies (67 percent) included ethical conduct as a performance measure in employee evaluations, up from 60 percent in 2011.
- Almost three out of four companies (74 percent) communicated internally about disciplinary actions when wrongdoing occurred.
The National Business Ethics Survey® for 2013 went on to report that in strong ethical cultures, management and supervisors who conduct themselves according to the standards below provide the character needed to positively influence employees.

- Communicate ethics as a priority.
- Set a good example of ethical conduct.
- Keep commitments.
- Provide information about what is going on.
- Support the following of organizational standards.
- Consider ethics in making decisions.
- Talk about ethics in the work we do.

Three F’s of Building Character

- **Foundation:**
  Your foundation is the state of your character today. It is the starting point on which you strengthen your character and leadership abilities.

- **Feedback:**
  In the feedback stage, you should look for insight on where you can improve. It is important not to limit yourself here, so take a 360° approach to seeking feedback.
  You should consider your bosses, friends, colleagues, and even employees as valuable sources of feedback.

- **Friction:**
  Once you have identified an area for improvement, act on it. Friction implies the difficulty it may take to make that improvement, but anticipating the positive outcome will help.

Keep in mind that this is a continuous process. If we are honest, there will always be areas for improvement. Some may be new, some may be issues of which we have been aware for years, and some may be issues we thought were handled. Constantly applying this continuous improvement practice will keep you moving forward.

**Five Principles of Developing Character**

There is no magic formula for character improvement, nor is there a series of rules to memorize. The definition of character given in the first part of this Module, “a combination of moral maturity and commitment to doing the right thing regardless of the personal cost,” describes how to attain it. Learning ethical and moral behavior and practicing it are the keys to developing character. The following principles embody the type of attitude that can help you build character:

- Work on yourself before you work on others.
- Work on yourself more than you work on others.
- It’s easier to teach what is right than to correct what is wrong.
• People do what they see; you must model it.
• Role models profoundly impact lives.

Character Outcomes

As you learn to take the high road in drawing conclusions, giving advice, and helping your employees, it will become easier and more enjoyable. You will find yourself doing the following:

• Basing decisions on “what’s best for the organization” instead of personal gain
• Giving honest opinions
• Keeping commitments
• Taking a stand on tough issues
• Being approachable and intentionally seeking feedback
• Treating others with respect (no favoritism)
• Trusting and working collaboratively with others
• Displaying emotional resilience in changing (or charged) situations

Additional Insights about Character

• Honesty, integrity, and respect are extremely important items to be modeled by leaders.
• Developing character requires that we be the right person before we do the right things.
• The establishment of a strong moral character is a choice everyone makes.
• Four of the most important things people expect from their leaders are honesty, competence, vision, and inspiration.

A Warning about Judging the Character of Others

It may seem easy to evaluate the character of others based on observed habits, behaviors, and actions, but it is not that easy. Individuals may want to make a difference; however, sometimes you question their integrity because it seems hard to get to know them. Later, you may find out that they do much of their thinking in private. These people are not very approachable or skilled at working collaboratively. When stating their opinions, they may sound harsh and judgmental. This is just one of many possible examples of how we can misjudge the character of others.

Character Quotes

“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” --Abraham Lincoln

“Personality can open doors, but only character can keep them open.” Elmer G. Letterman
“When the character of a man is not clear to you, look at his friends.” --Japanese Proverb

“If you can’t be a good example, then you’ll just have to be a horrible warning.”
--Catherine Aird

“Ability may get you to the top, but it takes character to keep you there.” --John Wooden

“Life is tough, but it is tougher if you are stupid.” (Variations of this line are often attributed to John Wayne but also to another actor, Steven Keats, playing Jackie Brown in The Friends of Eddie Coyle.)

“The character of a man is known from his conversations.” --Menander, a Greek dramatist

“You can tell more about a person by what he says about others than you can by what others say about him.” --Leo Aikman

Questions to Ponder

The following questions are intended to help you gain a greater awareness of the importance of continually enhancing your personal character and to motivate you to have the desire and willingness to change personal habits, behaviors, and actions:

• How does your character impact your ability to lead others?
• What are some of the more desirable traits possessed by persons of high character?
• How does a person go about improving personal character?

References

Other than those mentioned directly in the text, the following are the references used in developing this Module:


