



Character First by Stephen R. Covey

## **Interview with Stephen R. Covey**

May 1994

**Even the very best structure, system, style, and skills can't compensate completely for deficiencies in character. Why do you emphasize the importance of character in the lives of leaders?**

Because I believe that character (what a person is) is ultimately more important than competence (what a person can do). Obviously both are important, but character is foundational. All else builds on this cornerstone. Also, I believe that courage and consideration are the key building blocks of emotional maturity, and that emotional maturity is foundational to all decisions and all relationships. It relates to all the great management themes of the past. That's why I place my Seven Habits along a maturity continuum to suggest that the aim of all these habits is to help us achieve character and competence, courage and consideration. We can then be highly effective with tasks and with people.

**Why is the emotionally mature person also highly effective?**

Mature people may have a lot of ego strength, but they also have high respect for other people. They balance their courage with consideration. So they communicate in the spirit of "I and thou," the expression philosopher Martin Buber used in his book, *I and Thou*. Immature people communicate in terms of "I and it" where they treat people like objects or things, or "it and it" where they manipulate and treat themselves in the same way. Or they may think in term of "it and thou," having respect for others, but not for themselves.

**When did you first arrive at this notion of maturity being a balance between courage and consideration?**

I first learned this concept from one of my professors at the Harvard Business School, Rhand Saxenian. At the time, Rhand was working on his own doctoral thesis on the subject. This is how he taught it: emotional maturity is the ability to express your feelings and convictions with courage, balanced with consideration for the feelings and convictions of others.

### **And that hit you like a lightning bolt?**

Yes, the truth of that idea struck me powerfully. But even more powerful was the way he modeled it. For instance, when we entered the statistics portion of the course, he told the class that he didn't know much about statistics, and that he would be learning along with us. He also acknowledged what our feelings might be, as we were in competition with other students and sections and had to take a school-wide exam. In self-defense, we sent a delegation to the dean's office to ask for a new teacher of statistics. We told the dean that we liked Mr. Saxenian as a teacher but that his ignorance of statistics would put us at a disadvantage when we took the tests. To our amazement, the dean simply said, "Well, just do the best you can." So with the teacher's help, we got some technical notes and passed them around. In a sense, we taught each other statistics. And our section, out of eight, came out second in the exams. I'm convinced we did well because Rhand had the courage to confess his ignorance of the subject and the consideration to help us come up with a solution.

### **Did your professor show you that "courage balanced with consideration" was common to great leaders?**

Yes, in fact, Rhand went back through history to show how the truly great leaders who built strong cultures behind a common shared vision were those who had these two characteristics of emotional maturity, who beautifully balanced courage and consideration.

### **In a different way, haven't you also tested this idea?**

Yes, in many ways. First, I have gone back into the history of management thought, interpersonal relationships theory, and human psychology theory, and I have found the same two concepts. For instance, the transactional analysis area that Thomas Harris made popular in his book, *I'm Okay, You're Okay*, really had its theoretical roots in both Eric Berne's, *Games People Play*, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories. Well, what is "I'm okay, you're okay" but courage balanced with consideration? "I'm okay, you're not okay" means I have courage, but little respect or consideration for you. "I'm not okay, you're okay" suggests no ego strength, no courage. And "I'm not okay, you're not okay" suggests a very negative outlook of life. These are the four dimensions of maturity.

Then I looked at Blake and Mouton, who developed the managerial grid, which basically deals with two dimensions: are you task-oriented or are you people-oriented? Those who are high task-oriented and low people-oriented are called nine-ones. Those who are high people-oriented and low task-oriented are one-nines. Those who are in the middle are five-fives. The ideal, of course, is nine-nine high people and high

task. In other words, high courage to drive what you want to get the task done, plus high respect and consideration for others. Again, the spirit of "I-thou."

And then I noted that the concept of "win-win" is essentially the same thing: you have high respect for self to ensure that you win, but you work in a way that enables other people to win as well. If you're synergistic and have the "I-thou" spirit, you create far better solutions, as manifest in mission statements, decisions, strategic partnerships, or customer and employee relations. The win-lose approach is symptomatic of high respect for self and low regard for others and their situation. The lose-win approach suggests low respect for self, and high regard for other people. I examined other psychological theories and found that they all look at the two sides. Sometimes courage is called respect, confidence, tough-mindedness, or ego strength; and consideration may be called empathy or kind-heartedness. I found that same balance in the great philosophical and religious literature. "Love thy neighbor as thyself" is an expression of the spirit of "I-thou."

Finally, I've interviewed a lot of Malcolm Baldrige award winners, and asked them the question, "What is the most difficult challenge you faced?" And they always say, "Giving up control." In effect, they are saying, "We had to create 'I-thou' relationships with all stakeholders. We had to reach the point where we really believed in other people, in a bone-deep way, not in some public relations manner. We also had to learn to be strong in expressing how we see it." Essentially, the Baldrige winners learned to think win-win, seek first to understand then to be understood, and synergize (Habits 4, 5 and 6 of the Seven Habits). By practicing these habits, they gained new insights and learning's, opened new options, engaged in high-level partnering and bonding, and boosted creativity. But it has to come out of this deep spirit of win-win, I and thou, courage balanced with consideration.

### **Is "courage balanced with consideration" a good way to achieve both improved results and relationships?**

Exactly. Better in both ways. You get more results, and you get better relationships. Without this balance, you tend to get one at the expense of the other. For instance, I once worked with the president of a large organization who was a nine-one, meaning he was a result-oriented person. But, if he needed to build relationships to get results, he could charm the socks off anybody. But it was always with regard to a task. His task became the relationship. In other words, once he built the strategic relationship, he would then get on with the task. I have known other people who were the opposite. They are so needful of relationships that they work relationships through tasks.

### **Is it possible to get a profile of ourselves as leaders to assess the balance of courage and consideration or determine our orientation toward results and relationships?**

Yes, in fact, David McClelland, one of the great research psychologists at Harvard, developed what he called his need achievement inventory. He would give people different pictures and then have them talk about a story that was portrayed in that picture. By using a number of these pictures, McClelland would profile the candidate, and then give his recommendations to employers who are looking to match the profile of the person with the needs of the job. He tended to classify people according to their need for power, affiliation, or achievement. In a sense, McClelland was looking at this concept of inward motivation. He identified character as the critical factor of long-term success.

**Do you feel that the hundreds of contributing writers to Executive Excellence over the last 10 years have verified the preeminence of character?**

What I have seen over and over again, in the pages of Executive Excellence and elsewhere, is how character eventually becomes more important than competency. So, even though people may go through management training and improve their skills, if they don't grow in emotional maturity, eventually their skills may even be their undoing. For instance, I witnessed this task-oriented president exhaust his social capital with the Board to the point he no longer had power or influence with them. The Board would not sustain the president, and eventually they had to make a change. Board members felt that they were being manipulated by one superlative presentation after another, one big charm after another. Eventually the hens came home to roost.

**And yet, isn't the training and education of most people designed to build competence and courage for the sake of getting results?**

Absolutely. Almost all training is focused on competency. That's the courage aspect of maturity - have your way, be nice to people, use the human relations approach, but not the human resource approach. The human resource approach asks, "What's your opinion?" The human relations approach says, "How's your family?" And the malevolent authoritarian approach says, "When I want your opinion, I'll give it to you."

**So, how can we meet this need for ongoing character development?**

We need to stop managing people by performance appraisals where some supervisor is judging someone else's character and competence. We need to look for balance between production (P) and what I call "production capability" (PC), which includes developing people and building teams. Because, as we learn from Aesop, if we go for all the golden eggs (P) without regard for the wellness of the goose (PC), we'll soon be out of business. This is why Peter Drucker says, "Don't judge people's characters." I totally agree with him. I tell executives to do away with traditional performance appraisals and instead look at how well that individual balances P and PC, results and relationships, competence and character,

courage and consideration. I also encourage them to set up a 360-degree stakeholder information system which gives people solid, scientific, systematic feedback on their performance in both dimensions. Then the person will say, "Gosh, I have low marks for team building and interdependency, even though I'm producing the numbers. What can I do? Now they recognize the need for ongoing character development, which they themselves have to take charge of. They can then organize resources to draw on their families, their friends, their church, their professional association, their support groups. They seek character development in order to produce those desired results. Why do you say that humility is the mother of virtues? Because humility helps us center our lives around principles. Humility helps us see the need for ongoing character development. Humility helps us be considerate of others. I then say that courage is the father of all virtues. Together courage and consideration create the internal integration inside the human personality.

This is why Karl Jung says that we never achieve what he calls individuation, the total integration of the human personality, until our later years in life. He says that people must go through different phases to learn some things. His belief was that it takes a great deal of experience, going around the block many times in many ways, before we gradually come to see the full consequences of erring on one side or the other and gradually achieve an integration of our internal character. When we create a culture based on interdependence or synergy, then we have an advanced civilization. In your books, you suggest that emotional immaturity manifests itself in the cultures of organizations in win-lose systems, processes, and structures.

### **Can one person, working within his or her circle of influence, really make a difference?**

Without question. I see it continuously. The people who start small and start to build on true principles in the ways we've been talking about, expand their circles of influence until they truly become models, and eventually mentors and teachers of other people. They become change catalysts and transition persons

### **Why do these change catalysts also need what you call an abundance mentality?**

The abundance mentality is courage and consideration. Scarcity is courage without consideration. Interdependence is courage and consideration. Independence is me-centered: I want what I want. For example, I once had an experience with the top partners of an international firm who after three days reached this conclusion: the experts in quality Juran, Crosby, Deming, and others basically say that people aren't so bad; what's bad are the systems they work in. But suppose you have an executive who has courage but no consideration. He'll think win-lose, and he'll design win-lose systems. Now, if he attends a quality seminar, he may start designing win-win systems but he'll implement them in a win-lose way. Why? Because character eventually comes out on top. So, all the top partners concluded: "We now know our problem is scarcity thinking. It shows in the way we admit people, the way we make them

partners, the way we reward them. No wonder we have a screwed-up culture. No wonder we're losing some of our best minds. No wonder we have such a political atmosphere where everyone is reading the tea leaves. We have moved so far away from our founding principles." In the last analysis, it's the character in the culture that counts. And yet we let many character-destroying forces have their way with us until we lose the original character of the founding group, or until we become programs ourselves, not programmers. And so, we must begin the process not only of reengineering business processes but also of self-directed rescripting of business executives.

### **How can executives rescript themselves?**

Well, often we must first be humbled, either by circumstances, not getting desired results and preserving the assets, or by crisis not getting the meaning or fulfillment that we desire, or failing to maintain good relationships with our spouses and kids. We are then more willing to accept the fact that universal principles ultimately govern. We are then more willing to accept responsibility for who and what we are. And we are then more willing to develop and live by mission statements, which does much to produce integrity. Ultimately what we are is the most critical component of success. In fact, I've concluded the only way that I can grow toward the ideal balance between character and consideration is by living true to my conscience, to the principles I know are right. If I begin in any way to falter in either courage or consideration, I can usually trace my failures within a few hours, if not days, to some flaw in the integrity of my life. We read of actors who feel that they were exploited in certain roles and parts early in their careers. But as they gain more respect, they turn down scripts and roles that aren't supportive of their new vision of themselves. They may even write their own scripts, or determine what parts they play.

### **Can executives also do that in their careers?**

I'm convinced that we can write and live our own scripts more than most people will acknowledge. I also know the price that must be paid. It's a real struggle to do it. It requires visualization and affirmation. It involves living a life of integrity, starting with making and keeping promises, until the whole human personality the senses, the thinking, the feeling, and the intuition are ultimately integrated and harmonized.

### **Why do many people need to break with the physical and emotional addictions that hold them down and reduce their quality of life?**

Until that happens, there can be little progress made, because your body is controlling your mind and spirit. Once the break is made, people then have a path to progress. If they can get some degree of control over their appetites, then they can have some degree of control over their passions and even begin to structure their motivations and desires. Their character development can then skyrocket. It's

almost like breaking away from the tremendous gravity pull of the earth and breaking out into space, where you have such flexibility and freedom.

**But don't we all struggle with these physical habits and appetites? How do you cope with the daily struggle?**

Well, I know that I have to keep myself under the influence of wisdom, conscience, and correct principles, or else sooner or later I suffer the effects directly, or those around me start to suffer. For example, I find that if I gorge at dinner I will not be sensitive later to other people's feelings. I have to live in control. Any time I start feeling angry, if I go into self-analysis, I can usually trace that anger back to some indiscretion or indulgence. I may justify and rationalize my behavior, but if I go counter to my conscience, I know it affects my spirit. And I know it affects the level of consideration I have for the needs and feelings of others.

**Don't you have much more to say about building character by following conscience in your new book, First Things First?**

Exactly. In fact, I think that is the central message of the book that in the long run what we are, our basic character, will take precedence over our skills, our competencies, or even the structures and systems we set up. My co-authors, Roger and Rebecca Merrill, and I are trying to encourage the development of a character that has this balance, this integration, between what you want and need and what others want and need. We encourage planting the "I and thou" seeds deeply into our mind, body, soul, and spirit. We can then run with the skills that flow from this balance between courage and consideration. With the strong foundation of character in place, we can add all the colorful elements of personality. If you don't have the character roots, you might pretend the part, but when push comes to shove, you'll get uprooted. You won't come through. You'll turn your win-win systems into win-lose systems. Such uprootings are among our most difficult learning experiences, but are also among the most powerful and useful ones because we can get on top of our own growth by recommitting to live lives of integrity.

**And will such personal commitments have profound implications on the organization?**

Yes, because the institution is usually the length and shadow of its founders and leaders. That's both good news and bad news; it works both ways. But if people are proactive and progress from dependence to independence and then develop the maturity to balance courage and consideration, character and competence, they can achieve high states of interdependency and set up win-win agreements and partnerships with all stakeholders. And their influence will expand, and their legacy will last.