

Dialogue I: Christians in Non-Christian Arenas

Building A Culture of Character: An UncommonSense™ Experience

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As a 36-year-old CEO in the middle of a high stress re-engineering of an otherwise charming 100-year-old company with 450 employees, it seemed poetic and befitting that Labor Day was the occasion of my heart attack.

Our re-engineering was textbook. When it was all said and done, we had won confident investor financing, the support of our vendors, the trust of our staff, the corresponding appreciation of our customers, on-target performance against our fairly revolutionary objectives, and (a bonus) the accolades of the media. We had balanced

competing stakeholder demands and managed our risk.

But during this same 18-month period, three of us on my seven-man executive team suffered heart attacks. All of us were less than 45 years old. After eliminating our water cooler as the suspect, I began to earnestly reflect.

What I had feared most during our 12-month preparation for the re-engineering was that we would lack the *right character* (not the *right competencies*) to endure the grueling 18-month transitional climate that we predicted for the re-engineering. I feared that employees

possessing low character would make the transition brutal. I was right in principle but (almost dead) wrong in concluding *which* employees would have character issues.

Twelve months prior to beginning much of our high-change initiatives, I engaged the staff in “character-building” discussions that led to the establishment of what we now call UncommonSense™—a clear leadership character ethic code. UncommonSense™ convicted our consciences and provided a map for directing a personal and corporate character-building culture, which we felt was essential to endure our stressful and sacrificial change initiatives.

I sequentially engaged every level of leadership, from executives to frontline staff and the two levels in between. I had five implementation principles: 1) executives must commit and set the example, 2) executives would be evaluated on their character-building intentionality, 3) the movement must progress through sequential levels of management with timing approved by the CEO (frontline gets the code last), 4) when anyone blows it, they must seek earnest forgiveness, and 5) we would invite everyone to read the

code and tell us everything they find wrong with it, thereby inviting (rather than intimidating) people into the movement.

Three of my executive team members were particularly enthusiastic about our effort, and together we felt that if our character-building culture was invitational it would be irresistible. So we encouraged our leaders and employees to find fault with UncommonSense™. We told them that the ethic of liberty prevented us from demanding their buy-in. We told them to take it home and beat it up. We also told them that as executives we would hold ourselves accountable to treating our staff with “UncommonSense™,” even if all the staff rejected it. Leading them with character rather than manipulation was our first ethical commitment.

Interestingly, if an employee found some fault with the document during the initial review, it was most often an opinion regarding grammar or how we ordered something. Since we didn’t use lightning rod terms like “loyalty” or “obedience,” we rarely encountered a content objection. And since we had pre-committed to treating them with UncommonSense™

regardless of their position, employees knew that they could be honest with us and were struck with the “uncommon sense” behind our promise. Buy-in came along just fine.

My post-modern-sensitive leadership peers were amazed that not one person had an issue with our absolutist assumption or our starting point of truth. Apparently the document was written well enough that it convicted an operative conscience. I have also come to believe that the business sector sub-culture is so pragmatic and the rules to business so unforgiving that “common sense” still has a seat at the table.

Within six months all but a handful of employees had publicly proclaimed their buy-in. The hold-outs tended to be paranoid blue-blood non-conformists (at least that’s what the other half of my less-than-charitable leadership team concluded under their breaths.) No matter; a massive majority of our staff preferred UncommonSense™, and that was the goal. Now it was really up to leadership to model the code; Principle No. 1 was in full force. That was the challenge and, as it turns out, the major stressor.

Indeed, I realized that we had suffered more stress in the

re-engineering battle from friendly fire than enemy shelling. Remember those particularly character-enthusiastic executive team members? They all had matching sets of cutlery in their backs. My own back was a bloody pulp. We were under siege from an enemy within, and it wasn’t underling staff. It was the non-character-enthusiastic members of my own executive team. I had made a costly assumption about top-level buy-in that was blinded by a combination of naïveté, my unwillingness to follow-up on suspicions brought by others, and my sheer enthusiasm for a re-engineering success.

Character failure was indeed the key contributing cause of our life-threatening stress. Besides causing broken hearts, it explained nearly 100 percent of every other corporate dysfunction, including non-voluntary terminations, lawsuits, team disunity, customer service failure, and low morale. I have also learned that the CEO’s mentoring function in building a culture of authentic character among his or her own team is the greater part of the entire leadership role. When qualitative measures (such as sustainability of success) are applied to

organizational performance, character is king.

Here are some other conclusions we have drawn when we assist leaders in building cultures of character:

1) Character ethics like UncommonSense™ are only relevant when they are accurately defined and then lived out in a compelling and consistent language and lifestyle.

2) It is not enough to intellectually agree with UncommonSense™. We must resolve to think and act on it in our life and in our work, in our private thoughts and in our public acts. Only then will these conscience-affirming ethics serve as a helpful, organizing, orienting, and sharable view.

3) The power of UncommonSense™ resides in its ability to confidently communicate intellectually competent character-forming ethics and to create a logical “common map” to guide teams of otherwise diverse people. UncommonSense™ stimulates people to favor truth, favor one another, and favor right behavior; it produces a uniting culture.

4) UncommonSense™ informs us of right and wrong; it validates or invalidates what we

value as well as how we behave. If we desire to demonstrate *right external behavior*, we must consistently put on and live out *right internalized beliefs*. The fidelity between our behavior and our beliefs is what produces the prize of a clear conscience.

5) UncommonSense™ is affirmed by the human conscience and forms the trustworthy conceptual foundation upon which healthy relational order rests. Since these ethics are unyielding, they can confound and challenge people who hold relativistic or undefined beliefs.

6) UncommonSense™ (and the good character virtues that it nurtures) is timeless and will hold up under diligent, intellectually honest investigation. Because it affirms the conscience, UncommonSense™ is a defensible, authoritative standard for ethical people. This is a significant claim. Hence, we invite the serious study of UncommonSense™ and ask every reader to thoughtfully articulate all that is wrong with it and share these views with us.

7) Nobel visions, worthy missions, and guiding values all require the foundation of character ethics. Ultimately it is UncommonSense™ that validates

any vision, mission, and value as having worth.

8) The increasing manifestation of UncommonSense™ is and will always be the central measurement of true interpersonal vitality and organizational success.

UncommonSense™ is designed for both Christian and non-Christian readers. It is biblically-based and therefore conscience-convicting, but it is not offensively religious. It serves various culturally-redeeming purposes.

For instance, Christian CEOs are beginning to adopt it as their character-building code. Graduating college students are attaching UncommonSense™ to their resumes to make a substantive statement about their character to potential employers. Government leaders are turning it into a pledge and using the content in their community addresses.

Perhaps most importantly, UncommonSense™ serves as a significant “common ground” building tool for marketplace Christians who are striving to establish relevant spiritual conversations with their non-Christian workers and peers.

A copy of the UncommonSense™ declaration and the entire code is reprinted in the Appendix.

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APPENDIX UncommonSense™

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The Critical Importance of Truth

1) SEEKING WISDOM: *Ethical people tirelessly seek something greater than intelligence or knowledge (knowing what is); they seek wisdom (knowing what is right or true). Wisdom must logically culminate in the identification of absolute or ultimate truth to be intellectually honest. The relentless pursuit of truth, its source, and its compelling advocacy, defense, and prudent practice is the moral objective of all ethical people.*

First Applying Truth to Ourselves

2) INTEGRITY: *Ethical people strive to live out wisdom (do what's right) in their private and public worlds. As a result,*

they are becoming whole, integrated, or ethic-centric people. Ethical people demonstrate the courage of their convictions by acting on the truth even when there is great pressure to do otherwise. They are principled. They will strive to apply the truth with consistency. They will not sacrifice truth for expediency and will intentionally avoid any behavior that is hypocritical or inconsistent with their beliefs. Ethical people don't break promises with themselves.

Applying Truth in our Relationships

3) COMPASSION FOR OTHERS: *Ethical people do what is right, kindly. Ethical people are genuinely caring, compassionate, benevolent, kind, and sacrificially giving. Because they healthfully love themselves, they can freely love (even the hard-to-love) as an act of their will. They live the Golden Rule, give aid to those in need, and seek to accomplish each of their life and work choices in a manner that optimizes this truth. Ethical people treat everyone as if they were viewing them as a brother, sister, mother, or father.*

4) HONESTY: *Ethical people speak the truth with compassion. Ethical people are*

truthful in all their dealings and are as accurate as possible in their communication. Their yes is yes and their no is no. They do not deliberately mislead or deceive others by misrepresentations, overstatements, partial truths, selective omissions, or any other intentional means. They are quick to admit a fault, a prejudice, or wrong in any matter. They take responsibility and avoid shifting blame. Ethical people avoid confusing others. They are not sarcastic, cynical, sanctimonious, or condescending.

5) JUSTICE: *Ethical people act on the truth with compassion.* They are honorable in all their dealings. They do not exercise power arbitrarily and do not use intentionally harsh, exasperating, or manipulative means to gain or maintain any advantage. They strain to reward good and reprove evil. They do not take undue advantage of another's mistakes, difficulties, or known limitations. Just people are sensible. They are diligent in weighing evidence. They contend for reason. They manifest a commitment to the pursuit of truth and a vigorous and unbiased examination of individuals and information. Then they declare and take action on what is right.

6) ACCOUNTABILITY: *Ethical people scrutinize themselves and welcome the scrutiny of others.* Ethical people acknowledge that human nature compels us towards independence. Our preference for independence results in isolation from one another. Isolation breeds temptation to unethical conduct. Ethical people resist this chain reaction by adopting transparent life- and work-styles that invite inspection. Ethical people place themselves in relationships that motivate self-examination and encourage constructive critique from those they serve.

7) FIDELITY: *Ethical people seek to fully integrate defined internalized ethics with their external actions in both their private and public worlds over time as a conscious lifestyle.* As a result they systematically contribute ethical value by improving the ethical culture of every relational network (organization, family, worship center, etc.) in which they participate.

8) RESPECT FOR OTHERS: *Ethical people treat others as they would want to be treated.* Ethical people have an accurate view of the human condition: everyone possesses both an inherent dignity as well

as an inherent depravity. As a result, ethical people place the ultimate worth of others as equal to their own worth. Ethical people act on this truth by nurturing ethics-based relationships with all others. They are genuine in how they value the diverse roles, giftedness, skills, style, personality, race, religion, and gender of others. Ethical respect leads diverse people to value the worth of others while having the liberty to disagree with their opinions.

9) PROMISE-KEEPING AND TRUSTWORTHINESS: *Ethical people do not break their word with others.* They do not make promises lightly. They prize interpersonal trust. They are candid in supplying relevant information and diligent in fulfilling their commitments. They make every reasonable effort to fulfill the letter *and* the spirit of their promises. They tirelessly maintain a promised confidence. They experience a clear conscience. They do not interpret agreements in any unreasonably technical or legalistic manner in order to rationalize non-compliance or to justify escaping their promises.

10) EXCELLENCE: *Ethical people strive to be their best, knowing that this enables them*

to do their best every day. Ethical people experience good "being" that fuels great "doing." Excellence is the result of high character merging with high competence. Excellence is a high task achieved through equally high virtues. When ethical people collaborate, they produce a "culture of excellence." True and enduring organizational excellence is only sustainable by ethical people.

11) SERVING-LEADERSHIP: *Ethical people sacrifice themselves for those they lead.* Serving-leaders model and mentor consistent ethical conduct and produce a predictable environment in which their sacrificial example of serving others produces relational harmony, principled reasoning, effective communication, an inspiring vision, constant learning, and ethic-centric decision-making. Ethical leaders promote both ethics education and ethical consequences to behaviors which violate these common beliefs. Ethical people respond favorably to ethical correction from ethical leaders.

12) UNITY: *Ethical people strive to build relationships that foster oneness among others who are bound with them to a common promise, vision,*

mission, or purpose. Ethical organizations seek *uniformity* in their people's shared ethics and *unity* among their otherwise richly diverse people. Without a commitment to uniform beliefs or ethics, there is no hope for sustainable unity.

13) FORGIVENESS:
Ethical people are humble. Knowing that they are far from perfect, they extend to and receive from others unmerited acceptance. Ethical breaches separate people. Separation injures conscience. Ethical people forgive and genuinely seek forgiveness to reconcile or restore their relationship with any person to whom they have committed an ethical breach. Seeking forgiveness requires a confession of error by the offender. Rendering forgiveness is a radical act of undeserved understanding (or grace) by the offended. Ethical people are thankful when forgiven and are motivated to forgive inevitable offenses against them in the future. Ethical people forgive others and seek the forgiveness of others intentionally.

14) HONORING AUTHORITY: *All people are imperfect, requiring boundaries for behavior. Ethical people willingly yield to the authority of*

those who are charged with upholding those boundaries. Ethical people help shape and then abide by the legitimate laws, rules, and boundaries established by legitimate authorities and strive to live within those boundaries for the betterment of all people. When those given authority violate conscience-convicting ethics, ethical people take ethical action to restore ethical authority.

15) LIBERTY: *Ethical people preserve their public rights by fulfilling their individual responsibilities.* Only those who exercise their ethical duties to others protect public freedom; therefore individual rights are secured through the exercise of these duties. Self-control is highly prized and encouraged among ethical people so that "public-control" demands are minimized. As a result, ethical people communicate and live out ethical truth and intentionally encourage others to do so as well.

16) LEARNING AND MENTORING: *Ethical people are lifelong wisdom-seekers and wisdom-advancers.* They have both a teachable and a teaching spirit. They impart truth to the uninformed. They reduce ignorance by illuminating the

disenfranchised. They multiply ethic-centric peoples and leaders. They nurture teaching relationships in order to maximize the talents of others. They are mentors. Ethical mentors endeavor to invest their lives in others in order to help them attain *their* greatest potential by gaining a vision for their highest purpose in their life's work and pursuing it.

17) STEWARDSHIP:
Ethical people understand that they "will reap what they sow," so they sow generously. Ethical people identify with the role of trustee or steward rather than owner. They perceive their function as a resource or role "caretaker" for a limited time. As a result, ethical people regard "positions" and "possessions" as "conferred in temporary trust." Ethical people, therefore, care for their respective positions and possessions diligently and seek to add value to every role and every resource to which they have been entrusted. Ethical people have a high regard for multiplying the value of their "trust accounts" for the purpose of serving others and benefiting those that follow them.

18) SEEKING COUNSEL:
Ethical people seek out wise counsel whenever confronted with questions that cause tension

and/or confusion between two or more ethics. They are guided by their tireless pursuit of truth. To help them in this rigorous task, they regularly seek the wisdom of ethical counselors. After they weigh this counsel, ethical people will act. The goal of this process is wise rather than popular actions. The result of a decision made with wise counsel is a clear conscience. The result of a life lived consistently under wise counsel is contentment.

Our Ability to Change
19) SUBMISSION TO TRUTH: *Truth transforms people only when we submit to it.* Truly ethical people *cannot not* transform. Eventually everyone ultimately confronts the power of truth. When confronted by truth, ethical people are convicted to replace or "put off" their unethical behavior by pursuing and "putting on" ethical beliefs; *unethical people are not.* This ongoing "replacement-lifestyle" of ethical people produces the enduring evidences or proofs called virtues.

20) TRANSFORMATION:
Ethical people bear the conscience-convicting fruits of virtue, which, when observed together, are the measure of character. Our character is the

only thing that is 100 percent in our control. While unethical people often attempt to counterfeit character, they will ultimately demonstrate the opposite of character (first in their thought lives, then in their private lives, and then finally in their public lives). Character is only possible when people measure themselves with the accurate standard of truth (ethics), is only produced under pressure, is only proven over the long haul of a highly-scrutinized life, and is only possible in an environment where truth is contended for and highly prized.