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Guest Columnist

## Employee choices stamp character of business

I'VE MENTIONED BEFORE THAT I'm a devoted fan of University of Southern California football.

I'll never forget the excitement of attending this year's Rose Bowl. The only thing better than seeing the Trojans be crowned national champions was noting the good sportsmanship the players exhibited throughout the season.

The team's strong character makes sense when you consider that Trojans are USC's mascot.

The English word for character descends from the Trojan expressions "charakter" and "charassein," both denoting the metal die used to mint coins. Just as the die stamps the coin's essential nature, a person's character determines that individual's internal moral well being and external reputation.

What is good character?

In the wake of the Enron, HealthSouth, ImClone, Tyco, and WorldCom scandals, the need to identify poor character is obvious. Even the most lenient among us would agree that insider trading or charging a hideously expensive personal shower curtain to the corporate credit card crosses a moral line.

**GUIDING RULE:** But how do we pinpoint good character? Let me propose the "three C" rule: consult your conscience, contemplate the consequences, and carry out your course.

First, consult your conscience.

Don't silence that internal voice when it whispers against a course of action. Each choice you make either builds up or tears down your character. If a camera televised all your thoughts and

decisions on the nightly news, would you still think and behave the same?

As writer Dwight Moody underlines, "character is what [we] are in the dark." If we shrink from public examination of our thoughts and actions, then we need to engage our conscience in an ethical close-up.

Second, contemplate the consequences.

Will your choice hurt someone or provoke unintended but harmful results? A genuine concern for others beats at the heart of good character.

The Golden Rule, in consequence, protects good character as surely as it promotes positive preschool behavior. Additionally, contemplation hinders you from rushing into an ill-conceived plan of action. It's far easier to keep a good character than to repair a broken one.

Third, carry out your course.

Consulting your conscience and contemplating the consequences avail for nothing should you fail to act. As Henry Ford said, "you can't build a reputation on what you are going to do."

It's what you actually do that matters.

**CULTIVATING:** A solid character's fundamentals — a sense of right and wrong, trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, and fairness — apply in every sphere of life.

Indeed, given the impact of competitiveness of corporate America, one might argue that good character is more necessary and vital in business than anywhere else.

Even from a cynical perspective, good character matters. Today's organizations heap increased responsibilities on ever-leaner staffs, yet at the same time these businesses face closer scrutiny by Wall Street, the government, media, and public.

The result? Immoral behavior by even a single employee can spawn far-reaching consequences that permeate the entire company.

Enron is a case in point. Unethical decisions by a few top executives trickled down to a moral crisis that eventually incinerated the whole firm.

Or consider the Hunts Point scandal. Bad behavior by a limited pool of people shook our entire industry in which handshakes, integrity, and someone's

word are paramount. If we accept that corporate character counts, then how can we as businesses cultivate good character among our personnel?

Evaluating your company's character climate is the first step. Does a culture of ethics, honor, and trust prevail? Are integrity and character key considerations when hiring, evaluating, and promoting individuals?

At the other end of the spectrum, do staff members hide their mistakes under lies and cover-ups? Is the company so bottom-line focused that it disregards people who cross moral lines so long as they generate revenues and profits?

If your company's moral compass falters under day-to-day business pressures, then character building must become a top priority.

An unethical firm will lose the confidence of its employees and customers for, as George Washington noted, "'tis better to be alone than in bad company."

Character building must start at the top. As in any strategic initiative, your firm's executives should lead by example.

Good corporate character resembles tree-hanging Spanish moss: it roots at the top of your company, and then spreads down and out over time.

**CONSULT EXPERTS:** The next step in company-wide character development could include consulting with outside experts. For instance, Harvest Fresh Cuts in Australia employs the "Character First!" program developed by the Character Training Institute.

In addition to bulletins on good character and its components, Harvest Fresh Cuts uses a multiple-point list of character qualities to evaluate ethics among its associates.

If this method is too structured for your taste, consider integrating character into your company's daily routine. For instance, executives could address morality and ethics explicitly when making decisions. Furthermore, let associates and subordinates participate in this ethical decision-making process.

Whatever approach you adopt, good character is essential to good business. Anyone can make a buck in willy-nilly fashion, but long-term reputation, trust — and, in consequence, profitability

— hinge on operating in an ethical manner.

It goes back to the Trojans: just as with the coin die, character stamps your company's essential nature. In the end, a golden character will produce a valuable business while a flawed character will melt your firm away over time.

Avoid that disappearing act by resolving that first your company will have the best character, and then your company will be first.

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