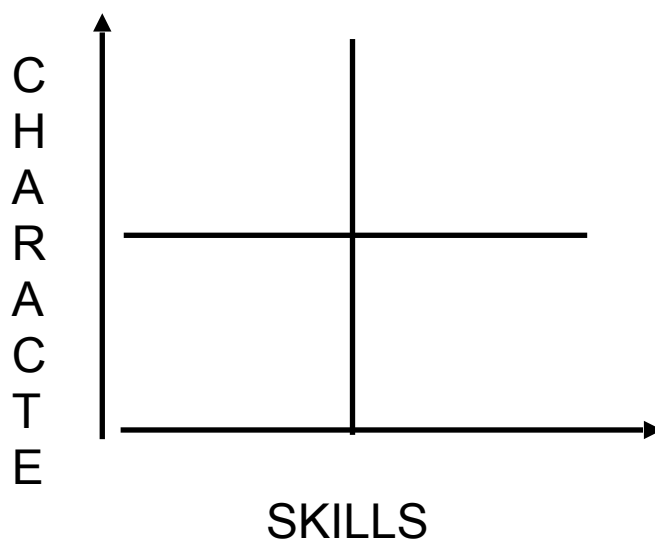


The Criticality of Character in Talent Management Decisions

As leaders, we are constantly making decisions about people: who to recruit and hire, who to send for extra education, who do we promote, and who to let go are just some examples. There's a tendency to focus on skills rather than character and that leads to problems. I've learned that character trumps skills.

In 2017, I was part of a gathering of military leaders and college football coaches. We were there to learn from each other. Though we came from vastly different worlds, we listened, learned, and came away richer from the experience. The following example from that discussion is focused on recruiting, but it could apply to nearly any personnel decision. Consider this simple graph:



The people we want to recruit are in the upper right quadrant. They have the the most skills and the most character. We instinctively understand that they will have the best possible effect on our team, not only because of the talents they bring to the organization, but also because of their character: they will help to make the entire team better. Our typical assessment systems, however, usually only measure skills: how much can a man bench-press, how well can a woman shoot (either a basketball or a rifle), how fast this person can write code and how fast that one can run a 40 yard sprint. Because of this narrow assessment, three key insights arise.

The first insight is that we get what I call “false positives.” The false positives are in the lower right quadrant. These are people with tremendous skills but little in the way of character. It is not very hard to think of a highly drafted college football player who self-destructed once he made it to the pros. They end up as “has-beens,” or worse, in prison.

The second insight is that we miss the “false negatives.” False negatives are in the upper left quadrant. These are people with tremendous character, but who have far less skills. Since we don’t typically assess character, we are more likely to dismiss or overlook them.

The third insight may be the most important: it’s far easier to move somebody to the right (build skills) than it is to move them upwards (build character).

What do I mean when I say “character?” I think that honor, integrity, and courage all help to define character. An honorable person knows the difference between right and wrong and chooses the right path, even when it is uncomfortable. Integrity is more a measure of consistency: a person with integrity does what she says and the audio consistently matches the video. A courageous person acts with a full heart and is able to overcome his fears to stand up for what he believes is right. Those three qualities—honor, integrity, and courage—help to define character, and it’s easy to see why we want employees with character.

Where does that leave you, the leader? When you’re making recruiting and hiring decisions, try to evaluate character as well as skills. You want both qualities, but skills are easy to measure and character is hard, so we sometimes neglect it. Once an employee is onboard, work hard to ensure development in all areas, and that means teaching and modeling both hard skills and core values. When you discover flaws, don’t get blinded by results and overlook them. Instead, focus on the problems and work to correct them. At some point, you may need to let an employee go because of an inability to correct a problem. Do so with intention. My experience is that unlike problems with competence, we tend to hang on to employees with character flaws for far too long if they are producing. It seems like those delayed firing decisions usually come back to have catastrophic long-term effects on the entire organization.

The next time you have a decision to make about which member of your team gets the nod and the promotion, consider the character of each candidate. You can train somebody to run faster or shoot straighter far more easily than you can teach them to make the harder right choice over the easier wrong, especially when nobody else is watching. Don’t ignore employees’ character just because it is harder to measure. You do so at your own peril.