



The Road to Character
by David Brooks

I would like to begin with a simple notion. Our most admired business and political leaders, athletes, and military personnel such as the Navy Seals or Delta Force share something in common: They have the ability to quickly appraise a situation, make a decision, and take effective action — under pressure, under stress. They get the most out of both themselves and others in important but stressful situations, and thus distinguish themselves from others who would be equally if not more competent absent the stress. What makes them different? Within our System, we give them credit for having a high-functioning Social Brain — their mental complexity gives them elevated levels of self-awareness, social awareness, and self-regulatory abilities. It gives them character.

Those of you familiar with the CIMBA Personal Development System know that we place considerable emphasis on character and character development. We define character as that essential to effectiveness combination of critical thinking, decision-making, and behavior, and particularly behaviors influencing our ability to get along with others. A person's behavior reflects his or her character. The origins of our usage of the term character derive from our emphasis on knowledge, rational process, and behavior as core competencies for effective leadership and followership. We constantly make the point to our program participants that while they may be hired on the basis of their knowledge or technical skills, they will very likely be promoted or fired on the basis of the effectiveness of their process and behavior traits and attributes -- so called soft or adaptive skills. Yet, in large measure, neither process nor behavior as components of effective leadership are expressly taught in school or professional development environments. More specifically, assessments of these traits and attributes - significant ingredients defining character — are all too frequently made on the basis of observation rather than through actual measurement. What is worse, educators and trainers often make the same mistake in believing that what is observable is also explainable and is therefore learnable. As a consequence, individuals whose workplace assessments are of concern are sent to training courses where the

emphasis is on knowledge, something we refer to as a technical solution, when in fact the issue is more behavioral, demanding an adaptive solution with the assistance of a coach, mentor, or other trusted advisor. With our corporate clients, we often advise them that such a technical "solution" approach to a workplace concern often leaves the individual worse rather than better off as they come back from such a course overconfident only to have that confidence shattered when the newfound knowledge fails to alleviate the concern. Knowing cannot be translated as doing. Theoretical understanding cannot be translated as practical understanding.

This line of thinking is not revolutionary. The legendary Peter Drucker first made this linkage more than seven decades ago in a quote he attributed to Mr. Alfred P. Sloan, CEO of General Motors in the 1940s: "The chief executive must be ... absolutely tolerant and pay no attention to how a man does his work, let alone whether he likes a man or not. The only criteria must be performance and character." But much like psychologists who more than 100 years ago found character to be too difficult to measure and so began to place their research attention on the seemingly less volatile notion of personality, so did the business world chose to avoid character and focus upon performance. More specifically, they chose to focus on observable measures of performance such as revenue, sales, or, of particular interest here, leadership where performance is measured by 360° information on the leader's observed ability to emulate a list of competencies deemed relevant to performance. Not surprisingly, it is this latter application that garnered our interest and attention.

Leadership competencies are those leadership skills and behaviors the organization or social group has identified as contributing to superior performance. The acquisition of such leadership competencies through behavioral adaptations has predominated thinking in leadership and talent development circles over the past 20 years. Competency models have certainly offered a vast improvement over prior models, which placed near universal emphasis on an individual's technical and administrative skills. However, the lack of dependable and nonintrusive measurement technology has necessarily confined competency models to behaviors observable by others. Within these technological constraints, an individual's development needs are based largely on data derived from the subjective observations of superiors, subordinates, peers, and mentors. Typical performance appraisals tools in use for such purposes include 360° feedback approaches, ranking methods, checklists, paired comparisons, and others. As an unfortunate consequence of the absence of measurement technology, leadership competencies essentially degenerate to a list of specified behaviors. Leadership development efforts then focus on closing any gap between behaviors observed and behaviors desired.

Not surprisingly, within such a construct too many individual efforts at leadership improvement focus on closing the gap by being an "actor." Essentially, the notion of change in this sense focuses

on emulating, acting out, the desired behaviors making up the expected leadership competency. This approach will work right up until the pressure, the stress, builds and then we find ourselves back to the hardwired behavior that raised the workplace concern in the first place — whether you are a business leader, athlete, or first responder (I encourage you to read the first paragraph again). That is, you cannot develop character if you choose to avoid the “char” part of the word and focus only on the “actor” part.

Fortunately for all of us, this past year has witnessed a strong revival in interest in the notion of character and its development. The work receiving the most attention is a book by David Brooks entitled The Road to Character. The book is essentially a collection of ten short biographies of people — three women and seven men — who Brooks identifies as having character, or more specifically, an aspect of character upon which he wants to elaborate (My favorite is Frances Perkins, FDR’s secretary of labor and the first woman to hold a cabinet post). He voices concerns similar to those we expressed in our TEDx talk on the culture’s slow migration to “I” from “We” (The transcript of the talk was the May 2015 ABC), something he refers to as the Big Me. He cites studies showing a significant increase in narcissism (consistent with our observed decline in empathy). He sees a world bingeing on self-celebration, evidenced by commencement speakers who tell graduates “You can succeed at anything you want to do,” graduates who justify unrestrained behavior with “I gotta be me,” vanity license plates, and boastful bumper stickers among many others. Although coming from a different perspective, his book provides a broad array of examples where technology and circumstances are eliminating or significantly reducing opportunities for social learning. He supports his arguments by citing the works of others from seemingly every walk of life from philosophers to writers to politicians to business leaders. In other words, this is a “course” on character; it is a “technical solution” to our concern for character and character development.

At CIMBA, we are very much focused on working with our student and executive participants to develop character, to use the tenants of neuroscience to improve thinking and behavior. From that perspective, it becomes more important to identify and understand effective means for addressing character concerns -- adaptive solutions — then to merely understand it as an intellectual exercise — a basis for a course or technical solution. In contrast to Brooks' work, Dr. Fred Kiel's Return on Character: The Real Reason Leaders and Their Companies Win focuses on adaptive solutions to the development of character. He both conducts and cites studies and affiliated works in persuasively making his arguments. He builds a development model similar to our 6-Columns, and follows a construct similar to our Social Brain theory. For example, he understands the importance of overcoming our brain's automatic System 1 goals which operate below our level of consciousness to move us away from anxieties and fears, something he refers to as “Disarming your Security System” (and what Prof. Keegan referred to as being “Immune to

Change," see November 2013 ABC). The difference between the two works is striking. Do you want to know something about character? Read Brooks. If you want to do something with what you know about character, then read Kiel.

But as we stated with Keegan, we suggest moving beyond even Kiel. By measuring and assessing physiological, emotional, and mental processes in reaction to stimuli of concern in social interactions, we can become aware of the people and situations that trigger unproductive, unconstructive, and unhealthy emotions, patterns of thinking, or physiological changes. Armed with such objective data, meaningful development regimens can be generated to address Social Brain development needs, to build character. With no two brains being the same, the development needs are going to differ from person to person. The essences of many of these core competencies were identified during your LIFE experience, which for many of you has served as the entrance to our unique development system. If you have not taken LIFE I strongly suggest it.

Through the use of awareness technology supported by science, we can better identify and then break down unwanted automatic or habitual reactions, emotional cycles, and thought spirals to actively rewire our Social Brains in support of more desired behaviors and responses. Through advances in mobile technology and biosensors, some of the very same i-technologies that have detracted from the development of our Social Brains particularly over the past 15 years, can assist in developing the circuitry necessary for the productive functioning of our Social Brains.

Computer-based brain exercises have been specifically engineered to cultivate our Social Brain circuitries, particularly in the development of our social awareness circuitry and empathy. With the use of contemplative practices and support technology, we can learn to both witness, as well as shape, how we think, feel, and behave. The use of health-tracking technology can monitor exercise, diet, and sleep, guiding us in understanding when we are at our best and how we can prepare ourselves to be at our best. On the basis of the objective data generated, we can begin to work to shift the direction of our behavior and promote healthier physical and physiological responses, develop our Social Brain, build character, and provide the necessary competency base to move on to important Leadership Competencies and beyond.