Character Still Counts
Trading Self-Centeredness for Self-Respect

By Joe Whitefield

It's official—I have entered into the selfie world. As much as I have resisted it over the last couple of years, I have finally given in. While attending a Rolling Stones concert this summer with my 18-year-old son, we took a few selfies to commemorate the occasion. (On a side note, I have asked him to delete the video of us singing "You Can't Always Get What You Want" before anyone sees it, and we both regret it.)

I really don't have a problem with selfies specifically, but they have often compelled me to contemplate the underlying qualities of our culture. It seems there is an incredible emphasis on our sense of self. Everyone wants to be self-confident, self-sufficient, self-promoting, self-made, and self-improved. Although there is nothing wrong with any of these "selves," if taken to an extreme they can lead to a bad version of self, namely self-centeredness. And self-centeredness, often revealed in selfishness and pride, leads to many problems in life and in the workplace.

SELF-CENTEREDNESS

Self-centeredness leads to problems in at least two ways. First, an inflated sense of self can distort your judgment. You may view others' ideas, actions, and motives more critically and less favorably than your own. This biased framework eventually leads to bad decisions and bad experiences. The second
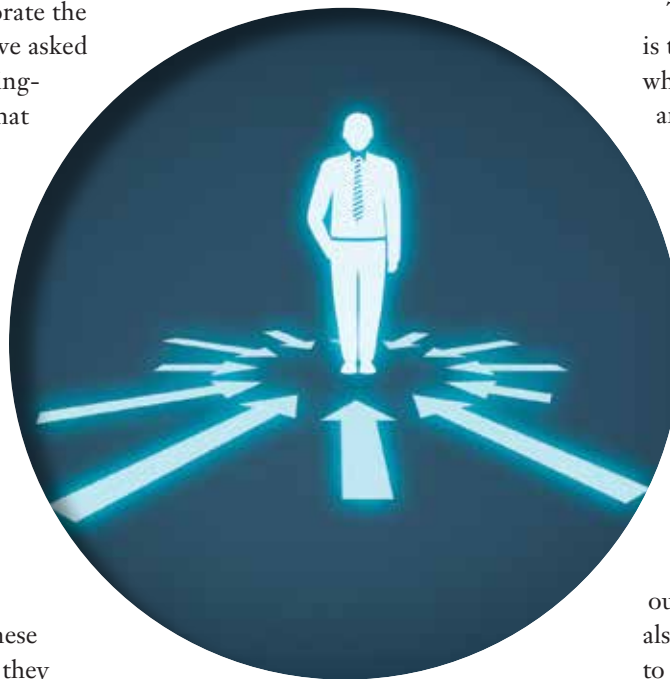
path to problems involves establishing an achievement "scorecard," in which success is determined by subjectively assigning credit and blame. This leads to judging people on a net "plus or minus" scale that is tilted in your favor.

The combination of these problems is the real killer. Think of the person who constantly takes credit for himself and passes along the blame to others, seeking only to validate a sense of importance or superiority.

David Brooks explores this condition extensively in his book *The Road to Character*. He describes the mindset and fate of the self-centered individual as "doing things that others approve of, whether these things are right for you or not. You foolishly judge other people by their abilities, not by their worth. You do not have a strategy to build character, and without that, not only your inner life but also your external life will eventually fall to pieces."

SELF-RESPECT

In stark contrast to the mediocre, self-centered life is the life based on character and principles. Character that assigns real value to honesty and humility creates an environment of respect. In fact, self-respect is the substitute for self-centeredness. Brooks says that self-respect "is not earned by being better

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than other people at something. It is earned by being better than you used to be, being dependable in times of testing, straight in times of temptation."

If organizations are going to reach their full potential, it is especially important for their leaders to exhibit character like this. Achievement is the result of this work environment, where people unafraid of blame are free to be fully creative and committed to success.

This is reminiscent of the findings of Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*. He states that all great companies have one factor in common—a leader of character. The great leader is one who "builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will." These qualities are manifested in the leader who liber-

ally gives credit to others for successes and takes personal responsibility for failures. The focus is on building a successful organization more than his or her reputation. Organizations with this level of leadership seem energetic and exciting, even on Mondays.

CHARACTER-BASED LEADERSHIP

Self-centered leadership cultivates an organizational environment where achievements are hollow and often short lived. Character-based leadership cultivates an environment where achievements are solid and lasting.

In which environment do you want to work? Either way, it starts with leadership. The challenge is to develop a strategy for character. Get ready though, because character is earned. You can't

simply assume it. It begins with the realization that no one has great character qualities down pat. If you think you are humble, you are probably not. The irony is that becoming a better version of yourself will probably require a greater focus on others.

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