

FEATURE ARTICLE

Learning from Leaders of Character

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The best leaders are learners. They study, analyze, and emulate those who have lit the path to leadership for them. I have had the privilege of learning from and carrying the torch for the exceptional leaders of Character Lab, a non-profit founded by scientist Dr. Angela Duckworth and educators Dave Levin and Dominic Randolph. Character Lab is a nonprofit organization that connects researchers with educators to create greater knowledge about the conditions that lead to character development for young people throughout the country.

Our mission is laser-focused on building character in kids, but as its leader, I have spent the majority of my waking hours ensuring that we, as an organization, practice what we preach. We can't credibly consider ourselves experts on adolescent character development and not demonstrate strong character ourselves. We can't talk about how to help all kids thrive without creating the conditions for our team to offer their greatest contributions to our work.

Fortunately, Character Lab's Board of Directors and Advisors laid the foundation for an organizational culture that allows our team's character to shine. Through their leadership, they taught us that we couldn't leverage our team's best character strengths without developing the conditions for them to be successful. Here's what I learned from these exceptional leaders.

To Create a Gritty Organization, Establish a North Star—And a Goal Hierarchy

When she co-founded Character Lab, Angela already knew that she wanted to use psychological science to help kids thrive. She studies grit—passion and perseverance for long-term goals—and exemplifies it as well. But how could Character Lab align what the staff did each day to this ultimate goal?

Feroz Dewan, a founding Board Member of Character Lab, always focused the team on the relentless pursuit of helping kids thrive, but he also emphasized the importance of flexibility in the tactics taken to get there. To foster individual ownership, Luis von Ahn, Character Lab's Board Chair (and co-founder and CEO of Duolingo), suggested implementing Objectives and Key Results (OKRs; Doerr, 2018). He taught us that the key to high-performing teams

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is establishing clear metrics for success. By clearly articulating the “what”—the desired outcome—we free our teams to be creative on the “how.”

For example, we created an OKR around increasing scientific evidence and measured progress through the number of publications in peer-reviewed journals. Initially, we encouraged more character development research with adolescents by incentivizing researchers with grants. But the pace of advancement was slow, and the process was not scaling.

As we grappled with this problem, Character Lab helped organize a symposium where Nobel laureate Danny Kahneman shared the very best idea he’d ever encountered for changing behavior. He spoke about the same concept on the “Freakonomics” podcast:

“[Kurt] Lewin’s insight was that if you want to achieve change in behavior, there is one good way to do it and one bad way to do it. The good way to do it is by diminishing the restraining forces, not by increasing the driving forces. That turns out to be profoundly nonintuitive...Diminishing the restraining forces is a completely different kind of activity, because instead of asking, ‘How can I get him or her to do it?’ it starts with a question of, ‘Why isn’t she doing it already?’” (Dubner, 2017)

So, we asked top scientists why they weren’t already doing research on character development. They told us it takes far too much time and is far too difficult logistically. Thus, to diminish the restraining forces on character development research, we created Character Lab Research Network (CLRN). CLRN helps researchers and schools facilitate research at scale, providing an infrastructure that cuts the time of a typical research cycle in half. This approach doubled the number of publications compared to our previous approach.

We Are Better Leaders When We Focus on Context as Much as Character

Organizational leaders often spend significant energy on hiring and professional development. When we hire, we assess a candidate’s “fit” based on their experience and the character traits they display during the interview process. But how a person behaves—and what they contribute to an organization’s goals—depends on two mutually reinforcing components: their character and the conditions in which they are asked to contribute. Leaders must ask themselves: “What can I do to create conditions that cultivate character?” How are we, as leaders, creating an environment that gets the best out of each teammate while ensuring they are supported and satisfied with their work?

To foster creativity, Dominic Randolph taught us the importance of design thinking, a problem-solving framework that centers users’ needs and challenges while creating innovative solutions. Making mistakes and learning from them is built into the process (Liedtka, 2018). Ideation sessions that held space for team members to flex their creativity—along with a push from founding Board Member Jackie Bezos, a fierce advocate for empowering youth voice—led to the founding of the Character Lab Internship Program (CLIP),¹ a remote, year-round education program where high school students learn about research methods, contribute to research on student well-being, and engage in the research process from start to finish. Prior to CLIP, most researchers conducted studies in a vacuum without input from those whom the insights were meant to help. The result: articles that were out of touch with adolescents’ needs and current realities. Now, with more than 100 students in CLIP connecting with researchers, our scientific insights are stronger and more relevant.

¹ Character Lab Internship Program: <https://characterlab.org/clip/>.

The context we create matters as much to an individual's performance as their talent and experience—and often determines how their character shows up. For example, Steve Arnold, Chair of Character Lab's Advisory Board, taught us the importance of building trust through vulnerability to enhance collaboration. When I joined Character Lab, Steve advocated for a trust-building exercise in which we shared personal stories about why we chose this work. Based on that experience, we rebuilt our new-hire onboarding to focus on building relationships and trust with fellow teammates because research told us that fostering empathy and authenticity leads to more trusting teams (Frei & Moriss, 2020). Through get-to-know-you meetings and conversations about conflict thresholds, we understand how each teammate's work fits into their broader personal narrative and how they approach healthy debate. When it comes time to discuss challenges or have productive conflict, we have built a foundation of trust and respect so that teammates come to the table with courage and humility.

Foster an Environment of Continuous Improvement

In Character Lab's Culture Book, we say that organizational culture is like a garden: it will grow whether or not you do anything. Ignore it, and the weeds will take over. Tend to it by explicitly defining and reinforcing your values, and you create an environment where your team's best selves can bloom. Culture is everyone's responsibility, but leaders must model the culture they wish to cultivate while creating systems that will allow it to evolve over time.

Since co-founding Character Lab, Angela Duckworth has infused the practice of *kaizen*—Japanese for “continuous improvement”—into Character Lab's culture. Her research has found that the most successful people and organizations constantly think of ways to do their work better (Duckworth, 2016). As she has written, “one form of perseverance is the daily discipline of trying to do things better than we did yesterday” (Duck-

worth, 2016, p. 91). Angela embodies this: After every speaking engagement, the first thing she does is request feedback. She's a great public speaker, but she does not want to hear about what she did well. Instead, she wants to hear what she could have done better, and she uses that feedback to master her craft.

At Character Lab, we practice *kaizen* daily—it is one of our core values. The leadership team invests time in monthly *kaizen* conversations with their direct reports in ways that allow for two-way feedback. They have embraced the concept of continuous improvement and expanded on insights from the Board and Advisors, which they have embedded into the culture in ways I would never have imagined. Rather than expecting perfection, which can engender fear, shame, and blame, our culture of continuous improvement normalizes making mistakes and striving for excellence in new and creative ways.

When I first took leadership at Character Lab, I was interested in applying a concept I learned in the military called Team of Teams, developed by General Stanley A. McChrystal (McChrystal et al., 2015). Team of Teams is a decentralized model of working groups in which teammates with various and sometimes unrelated job responsibilities come together around a discrete project to advance an organization's goals. It fosters a growth mindset—the belief that our abilities are not fixed and can be developed through dedication and hard work (Dweck, 2006)—because teammates learn new skills as they work across functional areas to solve a problem.

Initially, Dave Levin, Character Lab's Co-Founder and Board Member, was skeptical. He was concerned that this approach would diffuse accountability and that putting people with less experience in leadership roles would be risky. However, he supported the decision to pilot it, learn from the experience, and iterate. His trust and support allowed me to candidly share with him what was and wasn't working, and together, we continued to improve the model. For example,

after some miscommunications amongst the team on decision-making (as Dave predicted), we educated the team on Situational Leadership (Hersey et al., 1979), to scaffold leadership support, and RAPID, Bain's tool to clarify decision authority (Klein et al., 1986). Today, Team of Teams is a regular part of how we foster growth and learning, and it helps our emerging organizational leaders practice their leadership skills. Our commitment to continuous improvement has made us a more fulfilled, collaborative, and productive team.

Align Energizers with Roles and Responsibilities

Many people have had the experience of working on a project that, while challenging, gives them energy. It doesn't feel like work. When that happens, they may want to work even harder to meet their goals. By creating a space for individual teammates to share what they're passionate about and what gives them the most energy, leaders can better align their roles and responsibilities to foster grit. Then the organization can hire or develop others to fill in the gaps.

Angela Duckworth is a role model for playing to your strengths. Creating a platform for world-class scientists to conduct research and promote their work is not easy or glamorous. And it didn't happen quickly—she has been open about the difficulties and her personal misgivings (Duckworth, 2019). But Angela helped lay a foundation our team could build on to accelerate her vision.

After spending time as CEO of Character Lab, Angela recognized that she didn't particularly enjoy the day-to-day activities of organizational management, as she shared on her podcast, “No Stupid Questions.” What did she do? She hired me, someone who wakes up and goes to sleep thinking about organizational culture and management. This self-awareness freed her up to leverage her writing ability, scientific knowledge, and communications skills to help Character Lab thrive. Instead of preparing for board

meetings, she wrote guides to character strengths and invited top scientists like Dan Ariely and Adam Grant to contribute as well. Instead of developing a leadership team, she used her decades of expertise in behavior change to co-design a platform that radically accelerates research with adolescents. Instead of setting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), she did speaking engagements with Fortune 500 CEOs about character development and donated her speaking fees back to help fund Character Lab.

Excellent leaders “walk the walk” of character and culture. Knowing what gives you and your team energy is a key component of being an effective leader and allows you to race your strengths. Leaders at Character Lab are obsessed with understanding what their team gets energy from and are constantly working to align roles and responsibilities accordingly.

I am honored to have learned from and been supported by the strong leaders at Character Lab, who have created a culture that is equally demanding and supportive. Since its conception a decade ago, Character Lab has laid the groundwork for a new generation of leaders who are holding high expectations but doing so with care and concern for crafting conditions that cultivate character.

In the spirit of kaizen, I have chosen to step away from my role as executive director of Character Lab to pursue opportunities that energize and challenge me in new ways. I'm confident that this move will further benefit the organization by making room for new ideas and leaders to flourish.

I'm proud of how much Character Lab has grown. We have facilitated the research of over 150 world-class scientists—including Nobel Laureates and MacArthur winners as well as emerging scholars of color—which has led to dozens of publications in top-tier publications such as *Science* and *Nature*.

We've published 15 Playbooks²—research-based guides to cultivate character strengths—and more than 175 Tips—60 seconds of actionable advice, based on science. Through Character Lab's strategic partners including McGraw Hill, TED-Ed, USA Swimming, and others, these Tips and Playbooks have reached millions of parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors, helping facilitate character development in the young people they work with every day. Our Playbooks and Tips have also been featured in a range of outlets, from the back of Corn Flakes cereal boxes to CBS Mornings.

So, I step away confident in our Boards,' Advisers,' and leadership teams' ongoing commitment to helping kids and creating the conditions for other leaders of character within the organization to make their greatest contributions. Because we can only cultivate new leaders of character when we lead from a place of character ourselves.

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² Playbooks—Research-based guides to cultivate strengths of heart, mind, and will: <https://characterlab.org/playbooks/>.