

Character is Destiny Making a Habit of Doing the Right Thing

Based on the video, *Character is Destiny—Making a Habit of Doing the Right Thing* by Russell W. Gough

For further reading, see the following books by Dr. Russell W. Gough:

Character Is Destiny: The Value of Personal Ethics in Everyday Life (Prima Publishers, 1998).

Character Is Everything: Promoting Ethical Excellence in Sports (Harcourt Brace, 1997)

For more information, visit Dr. Gough's web site at:

www.CharacterMatters.com

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Character is Destiny

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Introduction to “Character is Destiny”

Not your personality, but your character, is your destiny.

The distinction is crucial — and making it clear at the very beginning of our discussion is equally crucial, given the ways in which pop psychology has blurred this important distinction.

Chances are that the distinction between personality and character will not be obvious to most people. Today, we often use the two terms interchangeably, such as when we say, “She has this type of character” and “that’s just her personality,” or when we speak alternatively of “his character traits” and “his personality traits.”

That character is more important than personality can easily be seen in the fact that we don’t typically hold people responsible for their personality traits, but we certainly do so for their habits of character. We don’t, for example, praise or blame someone ethically for being either introverted or extroverted. That, as we say, is just the way a person is, “by nature.” But we do praise or blame someone ethically for being honest or dishonest, unselfish or selfish, respectful or disrespectful, trustworthy or untrustworthy.

My point is essentially this: Human societies, like individual human lives, ultimately depend and flourish not on a foundation of personality traits but on a foundation of habits of character. That’s why I stress that it is impossible to improve our individual lives or our society without making personal character a top priority.

The picture of personal character I am attempting to paint gives special and bold emphasis to the reality that, at the most basic level, you and I as adults cannot blame others for who and what we are. From the standpoint of personal character, we must take responsibility for who and what we presently are as well as who and what we hope to become. And that’s why our character is indeed our destiny. In that spirit, you are about to make a bold step in discovering why striving to grow—or not—as a person of character is ultimately a choice that you determine yourself.

— *Russell W. Gough*

¹Adapted by Dr. Gough from Chapter 1 of his book, *Character Is Destiny: The Value of Personal Ethics in Everyday Life*, Prima Publishing, pp. 3-11.

About Russell W. Gough

Russell W. Gough is a professor of ethics and philosophy at Pepperdine University. He is the author of *Character Is Destiny: The Value of Personal Ethics in Everyday Life* (Prima Publishing, 1998) and *Character Is Everything: Promoting Ethical Excellence in Sports* (Harcourt Brace, 1997). His articles on ethics and character have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, and numerous other publications worldwide. As an expert in ethics he is a frequent source for newspaper, magazine, television and radio stories and has been interviewed and quoted extensively by national news media.

In addition to the business ethics seminars he conducts at Pepperdine, Dr. Gough travels extensively to deliver educational and inspirational presentations to corporations, schools, sports leagues, civic groups and government entities of every stripe. He has consulted and presented to numerous corporate and government clients, from Jeld-Wen, one of the largest private companies in the United States, to agencies like the U.S. Congressional Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness.

Dr. Gough speaks on a variety of ethics-related issues, including personal ethics, moral education and development, character education and development, character and ethics and the family, business ethics, leadership ethics, political ethics, sports ethics, academic ethics, professional integrity, and various related topics.

For his extensive work in the area of ethics and moral education in sports, Dr. Gough was named a Sports Ethics Fellow for the University of Rhode Island-based Institute for International Sport in both 1994 and 1995.

To share the education and inspiration of his work, Dr. Gough has created a Web site dedicated to ethics and character; www.charactermatters.com.

Dr. Gough lives with his family in Newbury Park, California.

Using this Workbook

This Workbook has a simple goal: to help you better retain, understand and apply to your daily life the important concepts presented in the *Character is Destiny* video.

To that end, this easy-to-use guide provides structure and direction to explore the ideas in the video so that you and the people in your group take away the program's fullest benefit. The Workbook is designed for clarity and efficiency. Both new and experienced users will find it intuitive to use, thought-provoking—even challenging—and, ultimately, rewarding.

Each section of the Workbook approaches the concepts in *Character is Destiny* according to this format:

Presenting the Concept

- A. Key Concept: Each key concept is taken straight from the video.
- B. From the Video: Each key concept is followed by an excerpt from the actual video script. They help identify and illustrate the ideas that Russell Gough explains. They're a perfect tool to help spur discussion.
- C. Program Insight: Each insight elaborates on the key concept and video script excerpt. They're a good starting point to help you discuss concepts in your own words.

Putting It into Practice

- A. Team/Group Activity—Activities are designed to give you and your group an opportunity to interact and learn concepts in further depth together.

The Challenge of Character

How to Find Your Way

Insights, Traps and Secrets to Character

Responsibility is the price of greatness.

—Winston Churchill

You're sure to enjoy exploring the issues in *Character is Destiny*—because they will demand much of you. The concept of character presents a fascinating set of challenges and rewards that we rarely address in our daily lives at work or at home. For that reason, you can expect the subject to be provocative and personal. But then, as a participant, your challenge is indeed to channel into positive action the personal and public energy that you will surely experience when exploring the subject of character.

To prepare for a positive and constructive experience, there are a few ideas—and pitfalls—you should anticipate and consider.

First, do not mistake the subject of ethics and character with politics, philosophy or religion. You may have the instinct to pull the topic toward the large, often intractable political and social issues of our time—environmentalism, gun control, abortion, free speech, etc. Those issues are important to all of us and very dear to most people. And that's exactly why you may encounter an urge to measure character in terms of those beliefs—because the ethics that character implies are equally intimate, personal and dear to most people.

But you will quickly learn, as Gough points out, that the difference between the personal ethics of character and large moral dilemmas is that character is measured in the small, mundane routines of daily life. That's why this program focuses on choices we make and actions we take over and over again in our lives. It forgoes larger, theoretical concepts of morality and beliefs in order to focus on *what's practical*—those things we can control.

Try to avoid wrestling with large moral issues. Focus on the smaller but significant daily tests of ethics we all encounter. Try to focus on self-examination, or the actions we choose for ourselves. Understand that, should your thinking drift toward those large, incendiary topics, you probably won't get very far.

Also, you'll see that the chief metaphor the video uses to deliver the key concepts of character is one that few people will ever experience, but that most can respect: life on a family farm. The farm metaphor has tremendous value for the discussion of character—not for the romance or idealism that surrounds farm life, but for the simple, straightforward and easy-to-perceive tests of character that that life presents every day to families who farm. In this sense, the metaphor is just that: an example. You might wonder about the connection between farm life and your own. Bear in mind that, on the farm, challenges to character—and their consequences—are very easy to see. In our own lives, they may or may not be easy to perceive. The point really is not that we should pretend to be farmers, or that farmers have the “ideal” character—but that we should use the example as a lens through which to study the character challenges we all face, whatever our profession.

Training Tools

“Character is Destiny” PowerPoint® Presentation

Electronic files of overhead slides with key concepts are included with the video package.

“Character is Destiny” Workbook

The Workbook assists in individual learning. Designed to work with the video program, it does not assume that a facilitator is involved. Of course, individual Workbooks can be used for group study.

“Character is Destiny” Pocket Reminder Cards

The cards, which list the program’s key concepts, can be used as handy reminders of the ideas discussed in the video.

For additional information on any of these items, please call **Star Thrower Distribution at 1-800-242-3220.**

Character is Destiny

Concepts and Lessons

The key concepts of *Character is Destiny*, which represent the structure of this Workbook, are listed below. The Workbook includes questions and activities delivered in the context of key points from the video program. The goal is to help you understand the concepts and lessons from the video program and apply them to your own individual and shared situations.

Character is Destiny Concepts

- Introduction to Character
- Thoughts: Where Character Begins
- Acts: Knowing What's Right, Doing What's Right
- Habits: Making Good Character Second Nature
- Character: Our Behavior Reflects Our Being
- Destiny: Reap What You Sow
- Character is Destiny Conclusion: Start Building Your Character Now

"Thoughts become acts. Acts develop into habits. Habits define character. Your character shapes your destiny."

Introduction to Character

From the Video

I have only got down on to paper, really, three types of people: the person I think I am, the people who irritate me, and the people I'd like to be.

—E.M. Forster

“Whether we’re talking about our family, our company, or just about any organization, successful teamwork requires a foundation of fairness, shared responsibility and trust. So what is character? You follow all the rules. You try not to speed, and you don’t run stop signs. You’re kind to your family, friends and co-workers. Must mean you have good character, right? Well, maybe.”

Program Insights

In all walks of life, we routinely depend on good character traits in ourselves and each other. Conversely, bad character traits can have a harmful effect on us and others. But the actual concept of “character” is something we may take for granted. Perhaps that’s because character is rooted in simple, everyday tasks—the little things that present us with choices to either do the right thing or not.

The video program illustrates the point through the choices a family on a farm makes for its shared benefit. The program suggests their character is defined by their behavior, by the habits that permeate their lives as they manage the small, routine tasks of rural life. That’s because those habits are just part of who they are. The success or failure of their farm depends on it. In other words, the success of the farm depends on their character.

Most of us never have or will work on a farm, but we face the same challenges as that family in our work and private lives. Sometimes those challenges are clear-cut; often they’re not. In either case, our character largely defines not only how we approach small ethical choices—and even dilemmas—but our overall behavior and, by extension, our success in the world.

Questions

1. What does good character mean to you?

2. How are the choices, habits and behavior that seem to define someone's character different than their personality?

3. Think about people you know who have good character traits you'd like to have, too: What is it about them that makes their character appealing?

Character Concept #1

Thoughts: Where Character Begins

From the Video

Character is what you do when no one's watching.

—Russell W. Gough

*"You might try asking yourself a few questions along these lines: 'If I was invisible—able to do anything I wanted without consequence or repercussions—would I be kind or unkind? Honest or dishonest? Respectful or disrespectful? Reliable or unreliable? Self-controlled or not self-controlled?' Your answers are a direct reflection of your personal character. Sort of like holding a mirror up to your **inner self**."*

Program Insights

Gough states that character begins with what you think. In other words, it's what's in your mind—in your heart, even—that governs the way you behave in various situations. A good way to take stock of those thoughts that drive your character is to consider which choices you'd make if you were **invisible**—if you could **get away with** whatever you wanted.

In fact, there are plenty of situations in life where we act like we're invisible. Driving in rush hour traffic, for instance. When we yell at slow drivers, cut off other cars, honk our horns—or worse—we're acting as if no one can see us. As if we don't have to be accountable for our actions. But it happens at work and home, too: when we take the last cup of coffee without refilling the pot for the next person. When we're late for a meeting. When we're short and disrespectful with a co-worker who struggles with a new concept on a project. When we're rude to or argumentative with customers who seem to be too much of a hassle. When we leave the garbage for someone else to take out. When we slam the door to let our spouse or friend know we're upset. When we lose our temper with a stranger on the phone.

Although at heart, most of us try to be good and want to do the right thing, it's in these invisible moments that our strength or weakness of character is most obvious. We're only accountable to our **inner** selves at those moments, and so our actions are really a reflection of our inner thoughts. To do what's right, Gough suggests, we have to make sure the thoughts that govern us are the kind that reflect good character in any situation.

Questions

1. Hold the "invisible mirror" to yourself: what are you feeling when you act like no one can see you? What kinds of choices do those feelings lead to?

2. Think about the amount of time you spend on the Internet. How does the Internet make you visible or invisible at work or at home? How does work or behavior on-line make you feel like you can "get away with" things?

3. Gough says most people want to do the right thing. Why is it possible, then, that there can be a conflict between the good and not-so-good thoughts that drive us in "invisible" moments?

THOUGHTS

ACTIONS

Character Concept #2

Acts: Knowing What's Right, Doing What's Right

From the Video

The final forming of one's character lies in their own hands.

—Anne Frank

"It's been said that the farmer who cheats is only cheating himself—put off mending the fence today and you'll be chasing livestock tomorrow. It comes down to a choice: to do what's most convenient—or to do the right thing. To do what's easiest, most enjoyable or most profitable—or to do what's right. Fortunately, that can very often be one and the same thing. When it's not, though, it can really put our character to the test."

Program Insights

Most people know the difference between right and wrong. But doing the right thing is not so much a matter of how you approach the hot philosophical or political issues of our time, but how you approach the myriad little choices and dilemmas that we face every hour of every day.

Think about the constant daily challenge you face to choose between what's convenient and what's right. Between what's easy though imperfect, and what's hard but the correct solution. Between evasion and responsibility. Between what's dishonest but more comfortable, and what's honest but uncomfortable. The collective sum of those numerous choices says a lot about character. That's because actions demonstrate the connection between **knowing** what's right and **doing** what's right.

Naturally, there are consequences. Just as the farmer who mends the fence today keeps his livestock safe tomorrow, the actions we take that reflect good character serve as positive investments in our lives at work and at home. Conversely, acts of poor character erode the foundations of our professional and private relationships.

But character can't be measured in the occasional acts of good we **might do**. It's measured in **consistently doing what's right**.

Questions

1. Why is there sometimes a disconnect between **knowing** what's right and **doing** what's right?

2. What happens if we fail to act at all? Haven't we still made a choice that has consequences?

3. How do our poor acts of character "cheat" us at work? At home?

Activity

Divide into two groups and designate a notetaker for your group. Generate a handful of answers to these two questions, and share your responses with the larger group.

- What are some consequences of good acts of character at work ?

- What are some consequences of poor acts of character at work?

Character Concept #3

Habits: Making Good Character Second Nature

From the Video

*You don't do what is
right once in a while,
but all the time.
Success is a habit.
Winning is a habit.*

—Vince Lombardi

"You actually have to practice having good character. I find it's helpful to ask myself again and again, 'am I **doing** the right thing?' Not, 'do I **know** what's right and good,' but 'am I **choosing** to do the right thing?' Every time we choose to do what's right, we practice; we exercise our ethical muscles to the point where doing what's right and good becomes a habit."

Program Insights

The video states that good character is like a skill you have to work hard to develop. In the same way that athletes, musicians, artists and others must work diligently to make their skills second nature, people have to practice acts of good character.

The point, of course, is that good character isn't always easy because it isn't always second nature. Good character is hard. On the other hand, sloppy technique—in athletics as well as in ethics—is easy. And this is precisely why Gough states that we have to **work** to make acts of good character a habit.

We cultivate character with consistently good actions—the right ethical choices, however big or small. We have to consistently return calls in a timely manner. We have to consistently show up on time for meetings. We have to consistently deliver the things we promise to earn people's trust. We have to choose to block time out for those reports, bills or letters that are so easy to neglect. By making a conscious, consistent effort to do all these things, we can make acts of good character second nature. We can make them habits. And once we've made a habit of something, we won't have to think about it anymore: we just do it. And that means we've built strength of character.

Question

1. What do you think about the idea that character is a skill? How do you "practice" habits of good character?

Activity #1

Inventory habits of good character that are consistently reflected in your organization. Where did those habits come from?

Activity #2

Divide into groups of two. Then, make your own list of two or three minor situations in the organization that "test" character. Exchange your list with your partner and discuss how you'd approach each dilemma to "practice" good character. When the group reassembles, discuss what has to go through your mind so that you "practice" good character skills.

Character Concept #4

Character: Our Behavior Reflects Our Being

From the Video

Above all, let your aim be what is true, what is great and what is beautiful.

—Count Alexander Stroganoff

*“We are what we repeatedly do. By developing strong habits of ethical character, many of the internal struggles between **what we’d like to do** and **what we should do** cease to be struggles at all. In other words, doing the right thing becomes second nature. It becomes who we are, and therefore what we naturally do.”*

Program Insights

Our behavior reflects our being. That is, the kinds of **choices** we consistently make represent the kind of person we are deep inside. It’s not about personality. We can have a silly or deadpan personality, an adventurous or docile personality, a flamboyant or formal personality—and still face the same ethical choices day-to-day. Character is measured in the routine **challenges** of work and private life—in the small choices we make between **what we’d like to do** and **what we should do**.

When the choice to do what’s right is second nature to us, when there no longer appears to be a “choice” at all, we can say it is “in our character” to do what’s right. To put it another way, when it’s in our character, we do what’s right because **we have to**, because it’s in our nature to do so.

We’ve seen how behavior can become part of our nature: When the thoughts in our head lead us to do what’s right, and we do what’s right so consistently that it becomes a habit, then that behavior is embedded in our character. The behavior becomes a reflection of our character.

Questions

1. If character is a reflection of who we are, as Gough suggests, what are the differences between character and personality?

2. At work, we often hear about personalities either clashing or meshing. How would it be different if we instead talked about the way “characters” clashed or meshed?

Activity

Divide into pairs again. Think about inappropriate behavior you've witnessed at work, home or in other contexts, and write it down. What action did you choose, and how does that reflect character? Did you have more than one choice? Share your answers with each other.

Character Concept #5

Destiny: Reap What You Sow

From the Video

Example is not the main thing in life, it is the only thing.

—Albert Schweizer

"We are what we repeatedly do, so why not do everything in our power to nurture the best within us every day? We are all role models. Through our actions, we may inspire or discourage. Motivate or demoralize. The only question is, am I a good role model or a bad one?"

Program Insights

Our character affects every aspect of our lives. There's no better evidence of this than in the example we set for others. Whether we're conscious of it or not, our thoughts, actions and habits are observed, interpreted or otherwise felt by others. The key point that the video presents is that this is true **for better or worse**. So why not work to make it **for better**?

Our strength of character has tremendous influence on the way the world receives us. Whether we're in our first job or are seasoned managers, whether we're meeting a new customer or working with an old client, whether we're dealing with our grandparents or neighbors, one thing is certain: the character we exhibit impacts others. We either reap the benefits of positive character in daily life or suffer the consequences of negative character.

Questions

1. What does Gough mean by destiny? How are habits of good character an investment in the present—and your effect on others?

2. Think back about the lapses in positive character you've had. How could they affect others? How could they shape your destiny?

3. Think about the inappropriate behavior that you discussed in the previous exercise (or a similar dilemma). Consider what would have been "the right thing to do," and whether you did it or not. What's the worst thing that could have happened if you actually had done what was right? What's the best thing that could have happened?

Character is Destiny Conclusion

Start Building Your Character Now

From the Video

*Character is not
made in a crisis.
It is exhibited.*

—Robert Freeman

*"Thoughts become acts. Acts develop into habits. Habits define character.
Your character shapes your destiny."*

Program Insights

To have good character, we cannot take character for granted. This is a good place to start, because it implies that character begins with our thoughts. It means we have to realize that every day we make choices that affect our lives and even determine our future. For the most part, they're pretty small. But add them up, and you start to see why those choices define who we are.

Whether we work in an office, restaurant, hospital or on a shop floor, we are either cultivating good character or maintaining the status quo. Good character is something we have to work on, something that has to become second nature. But it has direct influence on the world around us. We can make our work relationships stronger and more productive if we demonstrate good traits like integrity, respect, patience and trust. We become more in touch with ourselves, our family and our community as we learn to be more compassionate and generous to others. Finally, we make a difference in the lives of those around us at work and in private when we exercise all these traits. In return, those lives make a difference in ours. In this way, our character truly is our destiny.

Questions

1. What do you know now about character that you hadn't thought about before?

2. Think about character in the context of your organization's daily routine. How do you treat customers or vendors—both externally and internally? How does that reflect your company's character?

3. What's currently "working" for your organization? What habits of character can you count on when working with your teammates?

4. What's our ideal of ethical behavior in our work together? What's our current reality, both good and bad, in terms of ethics and habits of character? How do we move from reality to our ideal? What are the steps we must take to achieve it?

Concluding Activity

Building character takes time and work. In his book, "Character is Destiny," Gough offers a simple tool that can help in this endeavor. After you complete this course, use this checklist as you continue to refine your own thoughts, actions, habits, character and destiny.

"It is an all-too-obvious fact of life that we will be faced occasionally with difficult ethical situations in which we truly won't know where the ethical line is drawn or what is most ethically appropriate to do. Fortunately, these difficult situations—'ethical dilemmas,' as we refer to them—are the exception rather than the rule in our lives.

So if you find yourself in a situation in which you need to determine what is ethically appropriate, ask yourself the questions in this checklist."

— Russell W. Gough

1. Is it in compliance with the law or any written rules?
 - Civil law?
 - Company or institutional policies?
 - Rules of the game?
 - Religious law?
 - Family rules?
 - Other rules?

2. Is it fair to everyone involved?
 - To my family?
 - To my friends?
 - To my colleagues or co-workers?
 - To my employers?
 - To my community?
 - To those less fortunate than I am?
 - To others?

3. Would my ethical role model do it?
 - Who is my ethical role model?
 - How would that person feel about me if I did it?
 - How would I feel about the person who did it?
 - Do I have time to get that person's advice first?
 - Do I have the courage to do what that person would do?²

²Adapted by Dr. Gough from his book, *Character Is Destiny: The Value of Personal Ethics in Everyday Life*, Prima Publishing, pp. 159-161.

