

## *Ethics and Freedom*



**Sanford N. McDonnell**  
*Chairman of characterplus*  
St. Louis Missouri

*Mr. McDonnell was elected president of McDonnell Douglas in 1971, chief executive officer in 1972, and chairman of the board in 1980. He also served on the board's executive committee and as chairman of the McDonnell Douglas Foundation. His focus on ethics led to the development of the company's Code of Ethics, Philosophy, and Five Keys to Self-Renewal program. He retired as chairman in 1988.*

*McDonnell is a fellow of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics and past chairman of the board of governors of the Aerospace Industries Association. He is a former national president of the Boy Scouts of America.*

In 1748 Charles de Montesquieu, a French political philosopher, published *The Spirit of Laws*, a book that had a profound effect upon our founding fathers. In this book, he developed the concept of the separation of powers, which formed the basis of the us Constitution. Montesquieu also explored the relationship that must exist between people and their governments. He claimed that the most desirable form of government is a free republic; but a free republic is also the most fragile form of government because it depends upon a virtuous people. What did he mean by a “virtuous” people? “Virtuous” means living by high ethical values.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer gave one of the best definitions of ethics: “In a general sense, ethics is the name that we give to our concern for good behavior. We feel an obligation to consider not only our own personal well being but also that of others and of human society as a whole.”

In his claim about the importance of virtue, Montesquieu meant that in a free republic the leaders and a majority of the people must be committed to doing what’s best for the nation as a whole. When that commitment breaks down, or when the people consider only their own personal well being, they can no longer be depended upon to behave in the best interests of their nation. Legislators and other officials then are likely to respond by enacting laws, regulations, and thickets of red tape designed to control people and force them to consider the well being of others. And those are instruments of bondage, not freedom.

Benjamin Franklin emphasized the link between freedom and ethics when he said, “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.” Throughout most of American history, certain basic ethical values were considered fundamental to the character of the nation and to the character of the people who made up the nation – values like honesty, responsibility, respect, hard work, and caring for others. Each generation passed these values on to the next generation in the home, the schools, and churches and synagogues – each institution under-girding and reinforcing the others. Americans had a consensus, not only on values, but on the importance of those values; and from that consensus they knew who they were as a people and where they were going as a nation.

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville, a French politician and historian, came to the United States to find out what it was that made this upstart nation so progressive and prosperous. He traveled the country, talked to people in all walks of life, and then went back to France. In 1835 he published *Democracy in America*, in which he wrote, “America is great because she is good, but if America ever ceases to be good America will cease to be great.”

Today in America we have far too many twelve-year-olds pushing drugs, fourteen-year-olds having babies, sixteen-year-olds killing each other, and young people of all ages admitting to lying, cheating, and stealing in epidemic numbers. Crime and violence exist everywhere, and unethical behavior occurs in business, the professions, and in government. A crisis of character exists across America, threatening to destroy the goodness that is the very foundation of our greatness. Americans must return to teaching core values in our homes, our schools, our businesses, and our government. Character education should be an integral part of our formal education system from kindergarten through the university level.

### us schools

When our country was founded, Harvard, Yale and Princeton already existed as theological seminaries committed to teaching Judeo-Christian values. And in schools from kindergarten through the university level, character education was considered just as important as intellectual knowledge. Formal character education was largely removed from public schools over forty years ago; however, educators can now teach the universal values common to all the great religions.

Upon my retirement from McDonnell Douglas Corporation in 1988, I became part of a business-community-school partnership in St. Louis. This partnership initiated a character- education program called *characterplus*. The program has grown to forty school districts representing over 260,000 students. In schools where *characterplus* has been implemented, dramatic results have been noted. For example, behavior problems have improved and young people are more responsible and respectful. One of the most exciting results is that academic performance has improved. When students are taught to care about one another, they feel better about themselves and they work harder. The teachers are happier, the students are happier, the parents are happier, and the community is happier. It is a win-win program.

Following the *characterplus* partnership (in February 1993), I became a charter member and chairman of a non-profit organization in Washington, dc called the Character Education Partnership (cep). cep is dedicated to promoting character education and to helping communities and cities across the country to implement quality character education programs in schools.

cep defines character – good character – as understanding, caring, and acting on core ethical values such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and caring for others. Professor Kevin Ryan, a former cep board member, has a simpler definition: “knowing the good, loving the good, and doing the good.” There are many ways of building character, but the Character Education Partnership believes that first and foremost character is effectively developed in a moral and caring school-community environment.

## us business

With a few exceptions, business has done a poor job of under-girding and reinforcing the ethical values that young people bring to the adult world.

Business can agree that treating customers, employees and suppliers ethically is good business; but most corporate chief executive officers (ceos) clutch their halos and say that while others in the corporate world may need formal ethical programs, their own corporation has no such need.

As ceo of the McDonnell Douglas Corporation (mdc) in the 1980s, I determined the need for a company ethics program as a result of my work with the Boy Scouts of America. After telling young people for many years to live up to the ethical values of the Scout Oath and Law, I suddenly realized the company did not have a code of ethics for mdc employees.

Most companies have a code of conduct, which is a “thou shall not” code. A code of ethics is a positive “thou shall” code. mdc adopted a code of ethics at a Board of Directors meeting in April 1983. And we didn’t just hang our new code on the wall. We instituted an eight-hour training program to teach everyone, including the ceo, how to keep high ethical values at the center of our daily business lives. Upon my retirement in 1988, over half of our 115,000 employees had been trained in “Ethical Decision Making in the Workplace.” That training program was just one facet of the proactive ethics program at mdc (*which ultimately became a part of the Boeing Company in 1997*).

Most corporate misconduct comes from misinterpretation of management’s expectations. It has been reported that middle management throughout America appears to have serious doubts that people can get ahead by behaving ethically. With the tremendous pressure placed on employees to improve the bottom line, companies must apply equal pressure to always take the ethical high road in meeting goals and objectives. Otherwise, employees will be tempted to take ethical shortcuts.

In the final analysis, however, treating people ethically is not only the right thing to do; it is also the smart thing to do. No relationship can long endure unless it is based on ethical behavior. Suppliers, employees, and customers will not, over time, want to sell to you, work for you, or buy from you unless you treat them ethically. You may get away with cutting ethical corners in the short run, but strategically your business will not survive in the long run unless people can count on it to behave ethically.

## the us government

What is the present state of ethics in our government? George Washington and the other founding fathers felt that the primary criterion for service in our national government was “fitness of character,” and that fitness of character centered on personal integrity and standing in the community. How many politicians today are elected primarily because they are men or women of high integrity and ethics? How many are elected who place the best interests of our nation above those of their constituents? Is it even possible to get elected if you place the nation above your constituents?

All parts of our government need formalized ethics programs with effective self-governing controls, as much as, if not more so than, the corporate world.

## conclusion

Character without knowledge is weak and feeble, but knowledge without character is dangerous and a potential menace to society.

America cannot remain strong if schools graduate young people who are brilliant but dishonest, who have great intellectual knowledge but don’t really care about others, who are highly creative thinkers but are irresponsible. And America will not remain strong economically if corporate leaders are not honest, responsible, respectful, and caring.

America will remain strong and free if adults practice and teach young people to do what is right, to tell the truth, to serve their neighbors, to work hard and learn as much as they can, to have courage when hardship comes, to try again when they experience failure, and to never ever give up.

George Washington once said, “To personally understand and maintain the American way of life, to honor it by his own exemplary conduct, and to pass it intact to future generations is the responsibility of every true American.”