

Review of The Character Edge: Leading and Winning With Integrity, by Lt. General (Ret.) Robert L. Caslen, Jr. and Michael D. Matthews

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The Character Edge: Leading and Winning With —Integrity, by Lt. General (Ret.) Robert L. Caslen, Jr. and Michael D. Matthews. St. Martin's Press, 2020.

Lt. General (Ret.) Robert L. Caslen, Jr., the former superintendent of the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point and now the president of the University of South Carolina, and Michael D. Matthews, professor of psychology in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at USMA and, as well, a distinguished military psychologist, have written an extraordinary book, *The Character Edge*. Indeed, the book is both excellent and timely in at least four important ways.

First, some books are valuable to scholars because they creatively and uniquely integrate and extend the theoretical and empirical literature pertinent to their topic. *The Character*

Edge is such a book. Caslen and Matthews bring together the work of major scholars of character development, such as Damon, Duckworth, Emmons, Hunter, Peterson, Seligman, and Sweeney, and present a cohesive depiction of the content, structure, and development of character and its link to leadership of diverse organizations, not only the U.S. military but, as well, business and industry, education, media, and sports. They explain that character represents “the moral values and habits of an individual” (p. 3) and involves “a person acting on his or her world in ways that benefit it and, in turn, the world thereby providing benefits for the person” (pp. 7–8). They present evidence that, when an individual shows acts of positive character (e.g., generosity, forgiveness, or gratitude) that “do good for others and make the world a better place” (p. 8), the person’s happiness and well-being are enhanced.

How do these mutually beneficial relations between a person of character and the world

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they live in come into being? Caslen and Matthews emphasize that character is a developmental phenomenon and that the development of character is a life-span process. They explain that “A major theme of this book is that character can be nurtured and grown” (p. 18), and they stress that “Character must continually be developed” (p. 184). They draw on the work of Angela Duckworth to depict the components of this process: “These are mind-set, expert practice, and a social and physical environment that provides opportunities to learn” (p. 191). In addition, they explain that these facets of the character development process can be developed effectively within education programs that have “the big three factors in shaping character: (1) positive and sustained mentoring, (2) skill-building curricula and training, and (3) leadership opportunities” (pp. 185–186).

In discussing character education and its relation to leadership, Caslen and Matthews create a second dimension that enhances the value of *The Character Edge*. Some books have a powerful influence on professional practice because they transform complex research findings into clear and compelling ideas for effective applications to education, business, physical and mental health, or community service. *The Character Edge* is such a book. In fact, the application of character development scholarship is the explicit goal of this book. That is, the authors seek to “weave together the science and practice of character and character-based leadership into a narrative that both educates and inspires” (p. xix).

Throughout the book, the authors present character self-evaluation opportunities to readers and use rich, often poignant, and always illuminating examples of the links between character and leadership that are drawn from LTG Caslen’s military leadership, his service as Superintendent of USMA, Professor Matthews’s research, teaching, and mentorship of USMA cadets, and the experiences of leaders in different sectors of society (e.g., business and industry and sports). These features of the book are used to make a fundamental point

about the essential feature of leaders of character: A person can lead others effectively only if these relations are marked by the presence of trust, “The glue that holds these people together is their trust in their leader. Trust—perhaps the most important ingredient in effective leadership—is arguably the most important quality fostered in troops by their leader” (p. xx). In short, Caslen and Matthews illustrate repeatedly throughout the book that “trust is the most important element of effective leadership” (pp. 101–102).

The authors draw on the scholarship of Patrick Sweeney to explain that leaders in any sector of society must manifest three attributes to establish trust between themselves and the people in the organizations or institutions that they lead: character, competence, and caring. Caslen and Matthews identify a fourth attribute that they believe is also essential; that is, communication. They explain that the nature of the communications made by leaders to people within the organizations or institutions they lead is critical to the maintenance of trust: “Leaders must also better understand the potentially devastating second- and third-order effects of irresponsible messaging. The cost to our institutions and therefore our way of life is too great to do otherwise” (p. 126).

In their candid and clear discussion of what is lost in organizations, institutions, and in the American democratic system more generally when trust is compromised, when a leader fails to be a leader of character, LTG Caslen and Professor Matthews create the third dimension of contribution in *The Character Edge*. That is, some books constitute watershed events in public discourse because they provide a compelling vision for enhancing policies and programs of vital concern to the well-being of the foundational institutions of society. Once again, *The Character Edge* is such a book.

The authors explain that “When major institutions are led by people who do not embrace positive values, confidence in the institutions they represent erodes” (p. 3). Caslen and Matthews observe that “Trust evaporates when predictability and consistency disappear” and

that “When truth is distorted, then trust evaporates” (p. 103). Framed by these points, LTG Caslen and Professor Matthews warn their readers that “it seems that trust is under assault by politicians and others who believe they can achieve their goals by undermining trust in the media, the justice system, education, and other institutions” (p. 102). They explain that “Foreign entities, most notably Russia, sow social and political discord through social media” (p. 269), but they emphasize that these attempts to create discord “would not work if Americans trusted their major social institutions. Russia is simply exploiting a current national vulnerability” (p. 269).

I believe, then, that, at this moment in world history, this third dimension of contribution of *The Character Edge* makes the book required reading for all Americans. It diagnoses what the authors rightly view as “a character crisis in America” (p. 289), present the attributes of character and leadership of a person who leads with honor, integrity, and truth and, as such, can deservedly elicit trust among the people in the institution the person leads. As well, they have the courage to delineate the attributes of people who may occupy positions of leadership but fail completely as leaders of character. Finally, and most important at the time that I am writing this review, they point to the duty of Americans to act in support of their nation’s institutions of civil society and democracy.

This call to action is an emergent, fourth dimension of contribution of *The Character Edge*. What makes this book singularly exceptional, then, is not only that it is an exemplar of all three of the other dimensions of contribution I have described, although, because the authors combine these strengths within a book that is thoroughly engaging in its writing style,

would have been sufficient to make it a rare or even a singular accomplishment. However, what makes this book even more distinctive is that its call to action is so compelling and timely.

Readers will recognize this call even before they reach the end of the last chapter of the book. LTG Caslen and Professor Matthews guide readers through a creatively constructed specification of the attributes that define a leader of character in America, and they provide evidence-based ideas about how to develop such leadership. They then make the case that our democracy is at a tipping point. The American people need to recognize what constitutes a leader of character, and why such leadership is essential for the security and well-being of our nation. Their ideas explain why we, the People, must act to remove any leader whose lack of character is toxic and incorrigible, and whose perfidy is a danger to the integrity and preservation of our nation’s institutions. Their call to action implies that to fail to behave in support of our democratic institutions is itself a failure of character and of moral cowardice. It is a failure that in effect enables the continuation of toxic leadership and constitutes proactive complicity.

LTG Caslen and Professor Matthews envision *The Character Edge* as “a step toward providing people a better understanding of character, trust, and leadership” (p. 280). They have accomplished their mission with honor, courage, and humility. America is in their debt. It is now up to readers of their book, and indeed, all Americans, to embrace the knowledge and wisdom they have provided, strive to promote character and trust throughout our nation, and thereby safeguard democracy and liberty and social justice for all.