

# *The Six Pillars of Character*

---

**T**rustworthiness. Respect. Responsibility. Fairness. Caring. Citizenship. The Six Pillars of Character are ethical values to guide our choices. The standards of conduct that arise out of those values constitute the ground rules of ethics, and therefore of ethical decision-making.

There is nothing sacrosanct about the number six. We might reasonably have eight or 10, or more. But most universal virtues fold easily into these six. The number is not unwieldy and the Six Pillars of Character can provide a common lexicon. Why is a common lexicon necessary? So that people can see what unites our diverse and fractured society. So we can communicate more easily about core values. So we can understand ethical decisions better, our own and those of others.

The Six Pillars act as a multi-level filter through which to process decisions. So, being trustworthy is not enough — we must also be caring. Adhering to the letter of the law is not enough — we must accept responsibility for our action or inaction.

The Pillars can help us detect situations where we focus so hard on upholding one moral principle that we sacrifice another — where, intent on holding others accountable, we ignore the duty to be compassionate; where, intent on getting a job done, we ignore how.

In short, the Six Pillars can dramatically improve the ethical quality of our decisions, and thus our character and lives.

## **1. TRUSTWORTHINESS**

When others trust us, they give us greater leeway because they feel we don't need monitoring to assure that we'll meet our obligations. They believe in us and hold us in higher esteem. That's satisfying. At the same time, we must constantly live up to the expectations of others and refrain from even small lies or self-serving behavior that can quickly destroy our relationships.

Simply refraining from deception is not enough. Trustworthiness is the most complicated of the six core ethical values and concerns a variety of qualities like honesty, integrity, reliability and loyalty.

### **Honesty**

There is no more fundamental ethical value than honesty. We associate honesty with people of honor, and we admire and rely on those who are honest. But honesty is a broader concept than many may realize. It involves both communications and conduct.

**Honesty in communications** is expressing the truth as best we know it and not conveying it in a way likely to mislead or deceive. There are three dimensions:

**Truthfulness.** Truthfulness is presenting the facts to the best of our knowledge. Intent is the crucial distinction between truthfulness and truth itself. Being wrong is not the same thing as lying, although honest mistakes can still damage trust insofar as they may show sloppy judgment.

**Sincerity.** Sincerity is genuineness, being without trickery or duplicity. It precludes all acts, including half-truths, out-of-context statements, and even silence, that are intended to create beliefs or leave impressions that are untrue or misleading.

**Candor.** In relationships involving legitimate expectations of trust, honesty may also require candor, forthrightness and frankness, imposing the obligation to volunteer information that another person needs to know.

**Honesty in conduct** is playing by the rules, without stealing, cheating, fraud, subterfuge and other trickery. Cheating is a particularly foul form of dishonesty because one not only seeks to deceive but to take advantage of those who

are not cheating. It's a two-fer: a violation of both trust and fairness.

Not all lies are unethical, even though all lies are dishonest. Huh? That's right, honesty is not an inviolate principle. Occasionally, dishonesty is ethically justifiable, as when the police lie in undercover operations or when one lies to criminals or terrorists to save lives. But don't kid yourself: occasions for ethically sanctioned lying are rare and require serving a very high purpose indeed, such as saving a life — not hitting a management-pleasing sales target or winning a game or avoiding a confrontation.

### **Integrity**

The word integrity comes from the same Latin root as "integer," or whole number. Like a whole number, a person of integrity is undivided and complete. This means that the ethical person acts according to her beliefs, not according to expediency. She is also consistent. There is no difference in the way she makes decisions from situation to situation, her principles don't vary at work or at home, in public or alone.

Because she must know who she is and what she values, the person of integrity takes time for self-reflection, so that the events, crises and seeming necessities of the day do not determine the course of her moral life. She stays in control. She may be courteous, even charming, but she is never duplicitous. She never demeans herself with obsequious behavior toward those she thinks might do her some good. She is trusted because you know who she is: what you see is what you get.

People without integrity are called "hypocrites" or "two-faced."

### **Reliability (Promise-Keeping)**

When we make promises or other commitments that create a legitimate basis for another person to rely upon us, we undertake special moral duties. We accept the responsibility of making all reasonable efforts to fulfill our commitments. Because promise-keeping is such an important aspect of trustworthiness, it is important to:

**Avoid bad-faith excuses.** Interpret your promises fairly and honestly. Don't try to rationalize noncompliance.

**Avoid unwise commitments.** Before making a promise consider carefully whether you are willing and likely to keep it. Think about unknown or future events that could make it difficult, undesirable or impossible. Sometimes, all we can promise is to do our best.

**Avoid unclear commitments.** Be sure that, when you make a promise, the other person understands what you are committing to do.

### **Loyalty**

Some relationships — husband-wife, employer-employee, citizen-country — create an expectation of allegiance, fidelity and devotion. Loyalty is a responsibility to promote the interests of certain people, organizations or affiliations. This duty goes beyond the normal obligation we all share to care for others.

**Limitations to loyalty.** Loyalty is a tricky thing. Friends, employers, co-workers and others may demand that we rank their interests above ethical considerations. But no one has the right to ask another to sacrifice ethical principles in the name of a special relationship. Indeed, one forfeits a claim of loyalty when he or she asks so high a price for maintaining the relationship.

**Prioritizing loyalties.** So many individuals and groups make loyalty claims on us that we must rank our loyalty obligations in some rational fashion. For example, it's perfectly reasonable, and ethical, to look out for the interests of our children, parents and spouses even if we have to subordinate our obligations to other children, neighbors or co-workers in doing so.

**Safeguarding confidential information.** Loyalty requires us to keep some information confidential. When keeping a secret breaks the law or threatens others, however, we may have a responsibility to "blow the whistle."

**Avoiding conflicting interests.** Employees and public servants have a duty to make all professional decisions on merit, unimpeded by conflicting personal interests. They owe ultimate loyalty to the public.

## **2. RESPECT**

People are not things, and everyone has a right to be treated with dignity. We certainly have no ethical duty to hold all people in high esteem, but we should treat everyone with respect, regardless of who they are and what they have done. We have a responsibility to be the best we can be in all situations, even when dealing with unpleasant people.

The Golden Rule — do unto others as you would have them do unto you — nicely illustrates the Pillar of respect. Respect prohibits violence, humiliation, manipulation and exploitation. It reflects notions such as civility, courtesy, decency, dignity, autonomy, tolerance and acceptance.

### **Civility, Courtesy and Decency**

A respectful person is an attentive listener, although his patience with the boorish need not be endless (respect works both ways). Nevertheless, the respectful person treats others with consideration, and doesn't resort to intimidation, coercion or violence except in extraordinary and limited situations to defend others, teach discipline, maintain order or achieve social justice. Punishment is used in moderation and only to advance important social goals and purposes.

### **Dignity and Autonomy**

People need to make informed decisions about their own lives. Don't withhold the information they need to do so. Allow all individuals, including maturing children, to have a say in the decisions that affect them.

### **Tolerance and Acceptance**

Accept individual differences and beliefs without prejudice. Judge others only on their character, abilities and conduct.

## **3. RESPONSIBILITY**

Life is full of choices. Being responsible means being in charge of our choices and, thus, our lives. It means being accountable for what we do and who we are. It also means recognizing that our actions matter and we are morally on the hook for the consequences. Our capacity to reason and our freedom to choose make us morally autonomous and, therefore, answerable for whether we honor or degrade the ethical principles that give life meaning and purpose.

Ethical people show responsibility by being accountable, pursuing excellence and exercising self-restraint. They exhibit the ability to respond to expectations.

### **Accountability**

An accountable person is not a victim and doesn't shift blame or claim credit for the work of others. He considers the likely consequences of his behavior and associations. He recognizes the common complicity in the triumph of evil when nothing is done to stop it. He leads by example.

### **Pursuit of Excellence**

The pursuit of excellence has an ethical dimension when others rely upon our knowledge, ability or willingness to perform tasks safely and effectively.

**Diligence.** It is hardly unethical to make mistakes or to be less than "excellent," but there is a moral obligation to do one's best, to be diligent, reliable, careful, prepared and informed.

**Perseverance.** Responsible people finish what they start, overcoming rather than surrendering to obstacles. They avoid excuses such as, "That's just the way I am," or "It's not my job," or "It was legal."

**Continuous Improvement.** Responsible people always look for ways to do their work better.

### **Self-Restraint**

Responsible people exercise self-control, restraining passions and appetites (such as lust, hatred, gluttony, greed and fear) for the sake of longer-term vision and better judgment. They delay gratification if necessary and never feel it's necessary to "win at any cost." They realize they are as they choose to be, every day.

#### **4. FAIRNESS**

What is fairness? Most would agree it involves issues of equality, impartiality, proportionality, openness and due process. Most would agree that it is unfair to handle similar matters inconsistently. Most would agree that it is unfair to impose punishment that is not commensurate with the offense. The basic concept seems simple, even intuitive, yet applying it in daily life can be surprisingly difficult. Fairness is another tricky concept, probably more subject to legitimate debate and interpretation than any other ethical value. Disagreeing parties tend to maintain that there is only one fair position (their own, naturally). But essentially fairness implies adherence to a balanced standard of justice without relevance to one's own feelings or inclinations.

##### **Process**

Process is crucial in settling disputes, both to reach the fairest results and to minimize complaints. A fair person scrupulously employs open and impartial processes for gathering and evaluating information necessary to make decisions. Fair people do not wait for the truth to come to them; they seek out relevant information and conflicting perspectives before making important judgments.

##### **Impartiality**

Decisions should be made without favoritism or prejudice.

##### **Equity**

An individual, company or society should correct mistakes, promptly and voluntarily. It is improper to take advantage of the weakness or ignorance of others.

#### **5. CARING**

If you existed alone in the universe, there would be no need for ethics and your heart could be a cold, hard stone. Caring is the heart of ethics, and ethical decision-making. It is scarcely possible to be truly ethical and yet unconcerned with the welfare of others. That is because ethics is ultimately about good relations with other people.

It is easier to love "humanity" than to love people. People who consider themselves ethical and yet lack a caring attitude toward individuals tend to treat others as instruments of their will. They rarely feel an obligation to be honest, loyal, fair or respectful except insofar as it is prudent for them to do so, a disposition which itself hints at duplicity and a lack of integrity. A person who really cares feels an emotional response to both the pain and pleasure of others.

Of course, sometimes we must hurt those we truly care for, and some decisions, while quite ethical, do cause pain. But one should consciously cause no more harm than is reasonably necessary to perform one's duties.

The highest form of caring is the honest expression of benevolence, or altruism. This is not to be confused with strategic charity. Gifts to charities to advance personal interests are a fraud. That is, they aren't gifts at all. They're investments or tax write-offs.

#### **6. CITIZENSHIP**

Citizenship includes civic virtues and duties that prescribe how we ought to behave as part of a community. The good citizen knows the laws and obeys them, yes, but that's not all. She volunteers and stays informed on the issues of the day, the better to execute her duties and privileges as a member of a self-governing democratic society. She does more than her "fair" share to make society work, now and for future generations. Such a commitment to the public sphere can have many expressions, such as conserving resources, recycling, using public transportation and cleaning up litter. The good citizen gives more than she takes