Transformational change and leader character

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Abstract   Leader character is foundational to good leadership. We define character as an amalgam of virtues, values, and personality traits that influence how leaders behave in various contexts. Our research identified 11 dimensions of leader character and 60-plus character elements that are illustrative of those dimensions. We integrate two frameworks: John Kotter's eight-step model of leading change and our framework of leader character dimensions and associated elements. Specifically, the objective of this article is to illustrate which dimensions of leader character come into play at various points in the organizational change process and how their presence or absence affects the outcomes of the change process. Beyond that, we draw inferences about how organizations might develop character among all leaders but especially those younger, less experienced leaders who will become tomorrow's leaders of change projects.
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1. Transformational change

As educators, researchers, and consultants, we have worked with many organizations—some successful, some not—engaged in transformational change. We have been brought in at various junctures: the very earliest stages of change, after things started to go wrong and, occasionally, at the salvage stage when it was clear the desired change was not going to happen.

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Throughout, our ideas about leadership have evolved and we have begun to place a strong emphasis on leader character in our research, student programming, and outreach activities. Our interest in leader character emerged from the 2008—2009 financial crisis and a qualitative study we conducted that focused on why some organizations in the financial sector failed or had near-death experiences while others prospered, avoiding risks that they did not understand or could not manage (Gandz, Crossan, Seijts, & Stephenson, 2010). In the course of this study, *leader character* was a recurring theme in our conversations with leaders in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors. Based on both qualitative and quantitative research since

that time, we have defined leader character as an amalgam of virtues, values, and personality traits that strongly influence how leaders behave in various contexts (e.g., Crossan et al., 2017; Crossan, Seijts, & Gandz, 2016).

Most recently, we have been thinking and writing about the connection between success in leading deep and comprehensive change and the character of those who succeed in change leadership roles. In this article, we integrate two frameworks. The first framework is John Kotter's (1996) eight-step model of leading comprehensive change that, in one form or another, is the starting place for most executives, directors, entrepreneurs, consultants, or others charged with leading change or helping others to do so. The second framework (see Figure 1) is based

on our own research on leader character and is designed to give executives an accessible language as well as a set of relevant behaviors associated with character in the context of business organizations (Crossan et al., 2017; Crossan et al., 2016).

The leader character framework is based on research with over 2,500 leaders from North America, Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The framework postulates that there are 11 dimensions of leader character that influence individual and organizational outcomes independently and interactively. For example, effective coaching and development requires the leader to act with integrity, courage, temperance, and humanity to get meaningful results; successful team decision-making requires the leader to demonstrate collabora-

Figure 1.   Character dimensions and associated elements
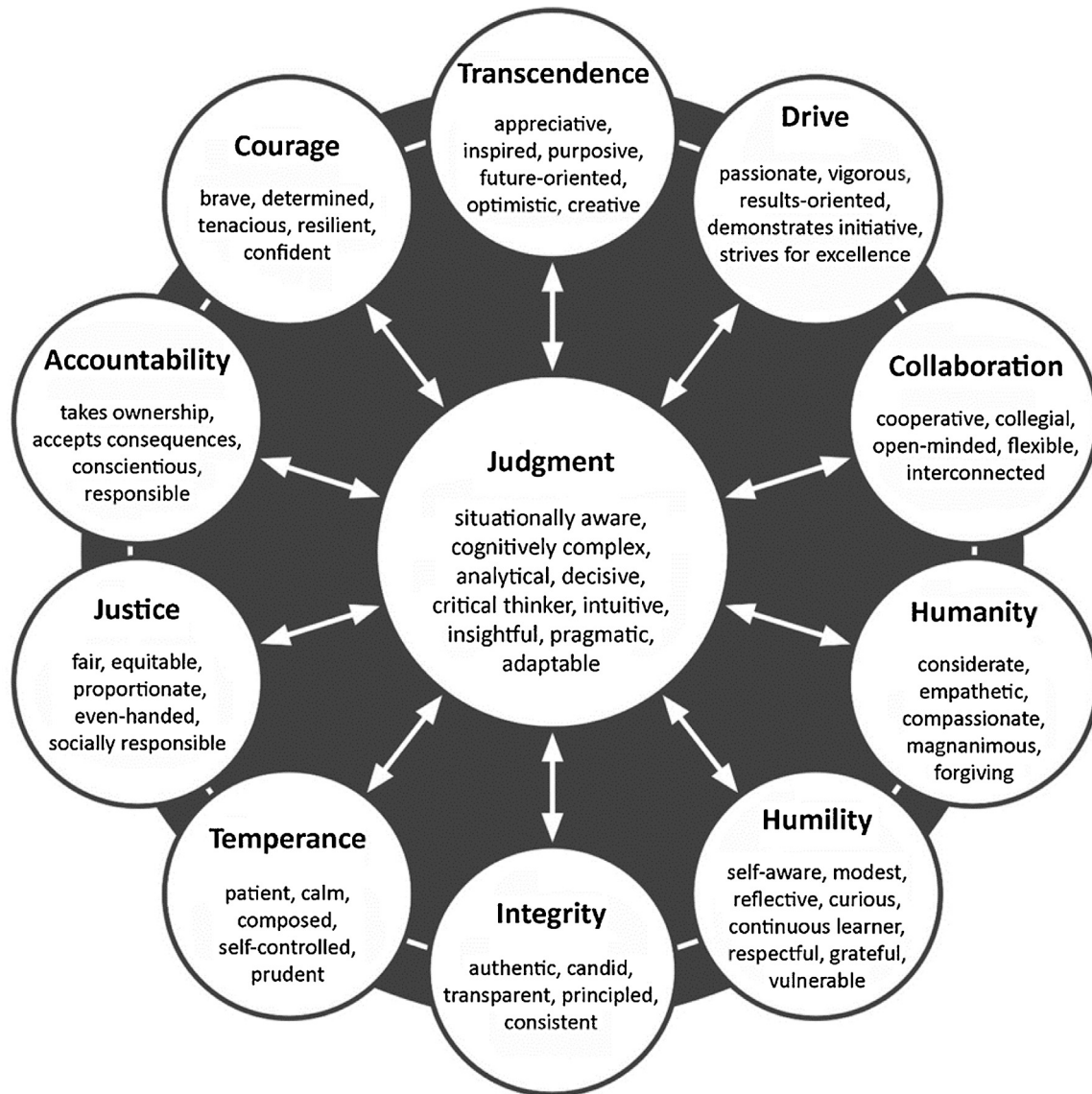
Source: Reproduced from Crossan et al. (2016)