

Character Development: Core Training in a Diverse Community

Association for Doctor of Ministry Education
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My presentation tonight is grounded in some of our distinct convictions as evangelicals about the primacy of the Bible, educational models that reflect our theology of progressive sanctification, unique practices we have developed and use at Gateway, and some personal examples that may sound a like a Baptist testimonial meeting. While you may not share all these perspectives, perhaps you will still be able to translate the principles underlying our practices and strengthen your respective programs.

Character development is a core issue

Gateway Seminary has been called, by ATS leaders, the most multi-cultural seminary in North America. For about 30 years, we have had no ethnic majority in our student body. That diversity is reflected in our staff and to a lesser degree in our faculty. We have worked intentionally to make our curriculum, teaching approaches, course content, and workplace reflective of our community. It hasn't always been easy, but it has been worthwhile.

In the midst of this diverse environment, in our DMIN (and also our Theological Field Education program) – we have discovered a common need among all candidates no matter their racial, ethnic, social, or economic background. While ministry best practices and leader-style expectations vary widely across cultures, there is a common ground of core training essential for all candidates. That common ground is character development.

DMIN programs are unique in their intended balance between head, hands, and heart – intellectual growth, skill enhancement, and character development. Maintaining this balance is challenging. Some critics consider personal development a “soft issue” – too touchy-feely for graduate education. Some candidates complain about program components that demand personal reflection. They enrolled to learn how to “do leadership” to people and find correctives to that perspective painful. Bowing to these two objections, some DMIN programs focus mainly on intellectual growth and skill enhancement, with only a token nod to character development. They do this to their detriment because they shortchange candidates from the full possibility of growth through the DMIN process.

Developing this conviction has been a 40-year journey of trying to understand how to do ministry effectively and train others to do the same. Like many younger leaders, my early ministry was marked by a passion to change something. So, I decided to change the world. That obviously didn't work. Then I decided the church was the problem. So I started a new one. While it grew into a healthy church, something was still not right. No matter how hard I tried to restructure the people and organizations around me, I was still deeply frustrated.

Through a painful series of ministry circumstances (too long to detail tonight) and a DMIN program that forced me to examine myself, God brought me face-to-face with this hard reality – my leadership problem was me! That insight started me down a path of trying to balance *becoming* the leader God intends me to be with *doing* the leading God intends me to do.

As a younger leader, I believed if I learned enough facts and accomplished enough tasks, I would satisfy God, my followers, and my peers. By doing those things, I would find deep fulfillment. I no longer believe that. Now I know true fulfillment comes from knowing God intimately, understanding his purpose to shape me into the image of Jesus Christ, and discerning how he is using his Word and my leadership circumstances to shape me toward that purpose.

God has a clear purpose for every Christian (including DMIN candidates)

God has an ultimate purpose for every Christian – including every DMIN candidate. Put most succinctly, he wants to shape our character to make us like Jesus Christ. Romans 8:28-29 summarizes this purpose: “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose. For those He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son....”

Let’s briefly summarize some key points from this verse as they relate to character development.

God has a definite purpose. We are called “according to His purpose,” therefore God must have one. God is doing something specific in each of us.

God’s purpose is to conform us to the image of Jesus. We are to be “conformed to the image of His Son.” God is busy remaking his children, including leaders. He is making us more and more like Jesus.

God is intentional about his purpose. Romans uses strong theological language – “...those He foreknew He also predestined...” to communicate his intentionality. God knows and determines, in ways we can never understand, that we *will* be conformed to the image of Jesus. God is relentlessly intentional in conforming us to the image of Jesus.

God’s ultimate purpose gives meaning to our circumstances. Often, the “all things” phrase is applied when bad things happen. Comfort is drawn from these verses during crisis, bereavement, or tragedy. That is certainly appropriate. But the phrase “all things” means all life circumstances, bad and *good*, transpire to shape us into the image of Jesus. Affirming this reality causes our leadership circumstances, no matter how puzzling or demanding, to have meaning in the context of Christian character development.

God’s purpose is good. God allows circumstances that have good *results* in our lives. Not every leadership circumstance is good – problematic parishioners, church conflict, organizational dysfunction, governmental or community resistance – should not be

mislabeled “good.” Fake piety or circuitous reasoning leads to calling these events good. They are not good and spiritual denial does not change that. But, God promises good can come from every leadership circumstance – the ultimate good of shaping our character toward the image of Jesus.

God has a purpose for every DMIN candidate. His purpose is to shape them toward the image of Jesus. He is relentless in his quest. God orchestrates circumstances so there is purpose in leadership experiences. Besides developing skills and gaining knowledge, we are charged with helping candidates discover this ultimate purpose in their leadership circumstances and learn – through appropriate reflection and personal choices – how their leadership context shapes their character.

Leadership circumstances as a character development laboratory

Why does God place people in certain leadership roles, positions, or responsibilities? The usual answer for most leaders is “because God wants to use me to (fill in the blank).” That was my perspective earlier in ministry. I thought God wanted me to be a pastor so I could lead a church, teach people the Bible, reach people with the gospel, strengthen families, and impact our community. Later, I thought God wanted me to be a church planter so I could connect with non-Christians, demonstrate a new church organizational model, and create new paradigms of ministry. When God called me to be a denominational executive, I thought it was to bring fresh vision to a convention of churches, create new ways of thinking about cooperative ministry, and find new ways to nurture leaders.

All of those were good reasons why God placed me in certain roles over the years. But none of them were the ultimate reason. The ultimate reason God assigned me to those positions was to use each role to shape me into the image of Jesus.

By the time I was asked to consider becoming a seminary president, the convictions underlying this presentation had formed more fully. When the search committee contacted me, my first prayer after the initial phone call was “Father, is Gateway the place you want me to be so you can make me more like Jesus?” This was a profound change for me to focus more on leader-shaping than leader-accomplishing.

God has placed me at Gateway because of how he will use these circumstances to shape me in ever-fresh, ever-deeper ways to be like Jesus. Part of that process, obviously, is functionally leading the seminary – doing my job. But the more fulfilling part is discovering more what the seminary community, challenges, and circumstances will do *in me* than what I will do for the seminary.

Leadership context is God’s laboratory. God places us so he can have the perfect laboratory for changing us into the image of Jesus. God controls our circumstances and uses them to shape us. We must learn to discern God’s activity. We also have the holy responsibility of helping DMIN candidates discover this perspective on how God is perpetually shaping their character.

Character development essentials

Some legitimate questions about his process are, “Does character really continue to develop over a lifetime? After all, aren’t we shaped as children into who we are? Aren’t the ‘formative years’ of our youth really when we finalize our inner core? Do we really change much after that?”

Certainly, personality and values are profoundly shaped by genetics, childhood experiences, family relationships, and other early life influences. This is true in all the diverse cultures we serve. But are these really the final, formative processes for a Christian? The answer is no.

The Christian doctrine of sanctification - the process of growing in grace, of becoming a fully devoted disciple of Jesus, of continually demonstrating more of Jesus’ character – mandates lifelong personal development. While personality is largely determined by genetics and childhood environments, character continues to be shaped over a lifetime.

How then, does God develop character? The answer is very complex. But in the context of our DMIN program, we have identified three primary streams that converge to produce inner change in candidates - the Bible, leadership circumstances, and disciplined discernment prompting intentional choices.

God uses the Bible. The most significant resource for character development is the Bible. God’s Word is the standard by which all impressions, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, choices, and values must be measured. Reading the Bible regularly, studying it carefully, hearing its contents preached and taught clearly, and memorizing key passages of Scripture are foundational to Christian character development. Keeping the Bible central keeps the entire process from becoming too emotional and/or subjective.

In our postmodern world, there is an endless search for inner peace and fulfillment through self-actualization - based on all kinds of self-defined, self-motivated processes of self-realization. The urgency of this quest, and the fact so many people are on it, speaks of our intuitive desire to grow inwardly. Most people want to be better people. But sadly, leaving God’s Word out of the equation truncates this God-created desire.

Postmodern spiritual seekers often develop a mindset devoid of accountability to Truth. They want to develop their inner person on their terms. This is why it is essential to regularly engage the Bible. Without Scripture as a guide, people are lost in a sea of subjective emotional, psychological, and spiritual experiences. The Bible provides an objective standard by which character development can be measured.

God uses leadership circumstances. The second significant tool God uses to shape character in DMIN candidates is their leadership circumstances. God uses leadership difficulties, all kinds of people and ministry events - as well as successes and positive outcomes - to create character development opportunities.

This perspective is acknowledged through several aspects of the typical DMIN program – like case studies or verbatim accounts (what we call Ministry Action Contact reports), papers focused on current ministry challenges, seminar discussions that veer toward situations candidates are facing, peer and lay consultation teams, and endless casual conversations. Wise DMIN leaders use these assignments and conversations to do more than communicate problem-solving information and skills. DMIN leaders who are committed to character development as an educational outcome also ask candidates, “How are these circumstances shaping you, sharpening you, confronting you, or changing you to be more like Jesus? How is your ministry situation fulfilling God’s good purpose of shaping Jesus’ character in you?”

Joseph (Genesis 37-50), had a life filled with unusual circumstances he did not cause and could not control. The crescendo was encountering his brothers – who expected to be killed for their duplicity – and Joseph telling them, “You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result – the survival of many people” (Genesis 50:20). Another translation (NIV) reads, “You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good.” Joseph believed God supervised his circumstances. This conviction - God supervises circumstances and will accomplish good through them - can be called “the Joseph principle.”

God uses leadership circumstances we cannot control, but also circumstances we control – like a well-crafted and executed DMIN program - to shape character. Setting up learning opportunities, creating structure to require specific behaviors, becoming accountable to others, requiring reflection, being appropriately directive, and confronting dysfunctional candidates are strategies good DMIN leaders use to enhance character development.

God uses his Word and leadership circumstances - both those we control and those we cannot - to mold character. As DMIN leaders, we challenge candidates to embrace their leadership laboratory as God’s character development workshop.

The Bible, leadership circumstances, and disciplined discernment. Joseph affirmed the good God did through his circumstances because of the perspective he had developed over his leadership lifetime. In my experience, this kind of mature perspective is facilitated by *asking God the right question* and *allowing time to discover God’s answer*. Working through this process – asking the right question and allowing time to discover the answer is called “disciplined discernment.”

Why use the phrase “disciplined discernment” rather than “theological reflection?” We still use the phrase “theological reflection” throughout our academic program, so why not use it here? My reason is to emphasize the conviction the Bible is the “plumb line” for character development. At Gateway, that assumption is built into the “theological reflection loop” model we use in our DMIN program. We have an institutional assumption biblical theology is the starting place for theological reflection and the “right question” and “God’s answer” emerge from that ground source.

What is the right question? The right question to ask about your leadership circumstances is “Father, why are you allowing this to happen to me?” Attitude and inflection are key to asking the question appropriately. Our attitude must reflect submission to God’s purposes, respect for his wisdom, and an expectation of a positive outcome. We are not accusing God with the question, but asking him to reveal how current circumstances relate to his purpose of shaping us into the image of Jesus.

The emphasis in the question is not on “why” but on “this.” Don’t ask “*Why me?*” Instead, ask “Father, why *this?*” Sometimes, concern with “why” something happens hints at a subtle arrogance. Deep down, we believe we do not deserve this kind of treatment. We must be more concerned with “this.” We ask God to reveal specific ways our leadership circumstances are connected to the purpose of Jesus’ image being shaped in us.

The second part of disciplined discernment is allowing enough time to discover the answer. Sometimes, the process is intense and answers come quickly. Other times, the process is more complex and answers take years to discover. In particularly impactful scenarios, the full answer might take decades to discover.

This is why one aspect of promoting character development in a DMIN program is candidates learning how to do theological reflection and carrying that practice with them post-graduation. Not all character development issues will be resolved and all growth accomplished while enrolled in a DMIN program. Some growth will happen, but learning how to keep growing over a lifetime is a better objective. A solid DMIN program launches candidates on a fresh trajectory of character development, with the tools to keep the process going after graduation.

God is committed to shaping Christian leaders into the image of Jesus. He uses his Word to set the standard and allows circumstances to turn up the heat. Disciplined discernment, asking the right question and allowing enough time to discover the answer, is essential to understanding how God is using a ministry setting as a character shaping laboratory.

The difficult side of character development

Ministry leaders are unique because character largely defines their qualifications to lead. The biblical qualifications for leadership stress character more than skill, education, or experience. Conversely, for ministry leaders, a serious character failure undermines prior results to a greater degree than for leaders in other fields. Character failure, and resulting organizational disruption, can leave churches devastated, people wounded, and ministries damaged for a long time.

DMIN program directors have a responsibility to courageously address serious character flaws among candidates. A few years ago, I developed a fresh lens to analyze, isolate, and define problem areas. This approach informs our DMIN program and has been adopted as a rubric for evaluating a student’s readiness for graduation by our TFE program.

For many years, I subscribed to the strengths and weaknesses motif to describe character qualities. This approach assumes every person has strengths and weaknesses. While these categories can also be applied to information mastery or skills assessment, they are most often used to categorize relative strength/weakness of character qualities. This approach counsels people to embrace their strengths and either eliminate or compensate for their weaknesses. This was my understanding - until a fresh encounter with a familiar Scripture passage shattered my assumptions.

Paul wrote that God told him, in response to a plea to remove an affliction causing him emotional, spiritual, and likely physical pain, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” God did not tell Paul to minimize or compensate for his weakness. God wanted him to embrace weakness as an opportunity to experience God’s power. That blew my paradigm out of the water!

This realization launched me on a search to find biblical resources that could inform a better understanding of how to classify character issues. That process involved months of study, field teaching new material in DMIN seminars, vetting with our TFE director, consulting with faculty members, and responding to feedback from students, candidates, and faculty. The result moved me from a two-fold to a tri-fold model of categorizing character issues as shown in the attached chart. I now recognize each person has character strengths, weaknesses, and liabilities.

Core Issues	Definition	Key Passages	Examples	Proper Spiritual Perspectives	Prayer Strategy	When Your Prayers are Answered	Continuing Challenge
Strengths	Spontaneously effective quality	Rom. 12:3-8 Eph. 4:11-13 1 Cor. 12:4-11 1 Pet. 4:10 1 Cor. 4:7	Speaking, organizing, serving, empathy	Receive as God’s gift	Ask God to use for his glory	People are blessed and God is glorified	Maximizing your strengths with humility
Weaknesses	Persistently problematic quality	1 Cor. 2:3 2 Cor. 11:30 2 Cor. 12:7b-10 Heb. 4:15 Heb. 5:2	Ailments, insensitivity, fearfulness	Submit to God and trust his grace	Ask God to empower for his glory	People are blessed and God’s grace is evident	Learning to compensate for your weaknesses
Liabilities	Detrimental, corrosive quality that undermines effectiveness	2 Cor. 12:20-21 Gal. 5:19-21 Eph. 4:26-31 Eph. 5:3-5 Col. 3:8-9	Addictions, destructive interpersonal skills, habitual sin	Confess your shortcoming or sin to God	Ask God to change you for his glory	By God’s power a new weakness is created	Learn the “warning signs” and break old patterns

Perhaps the most original aspect of this tri-fold approach is my contention that liabilities can be transformed into weaknesses. Once those qualities become weaknesses, they become badges of God’s grace – living examples of God’s capacity to empower

weakness. They also become a perpetual source of humility for leaders who have admitted their liability, owned the often painful process of transforming it to a weakness, and living daily with the results.

One personal example may help clarify this concept. Because of deep insecurity from an alcoholic upbringing, I was an angry perfectionistic young leader. This led to many ugly confrontations over failures in interpersonal relationships with church members. My abusive patterns were corrosive and detrimental. They were not a weakness to minimize or compensate for. They were liabilities, that left unchecked, would have likely booted me out of ministry a long time ago.

To fix this, God sent me to my first pastorate. It was a relationally-driven, small town church where people expected their pastor to be a leader – yes – but also a person who loved them, listened to them, and cared for them. They wanted a shepherd. They got a cattle driver. Then God went to work. He was unrelenting. Those dear people demanded I change. I fought back – hard.

The process took several years, but God had me in his laboratory and he was determined to change me. Gradually, my pride gave way to a realization of the serious nature of my abusive behavior and the character flaws driving it. Through counseling, the love of a good wife, the persistent confrontation and support of church members who believed in my future, and a structured DMIN program that demanded personal reflection – I changed.

Now, my interpersonal skills are a weakness. They are a demonstration of God's grace to change a person. The growth process is part of my character development story. My interpersonal skills still are not a strength. But neither are people frequently offended by arrogant inattention and verbal abuse. It's been a long time since anyone confronted me for being uncaring, callous, or dismissive. It's still a struggle to keep from slipping back to old patterns when I'm tired or frustrated. But, by God's grace, he has converted a liability that would have taken me out of ministry a long time ago into a weakness that shows his power.

DMIN leaders must have the courage to confront character liabilities in candidates. They are not hard to spot. They are usually glaring issues a candidate thinks he or she has masked well. Since we use a cohort approach in our program, candidates also get to know each other well enough to recognize these liabilities. One of my most profound DMIN experiences was being asked by a cohort to "come back from lunch about an hour late." They had decided to confront a liability in a fellow candidate that was becoming disruptive in the seminar.

DMIN leaders must have the courage to confront character liabilities. As we model this, candidates will learn how to do this appropriately with people they supervise in their ministry setting. Confronting a character liability is often fraught with tension and pain – for both parties. Yet, it is an act of love. Liabilities are detrimental, corrosive qualities that will ultimately lead to implosion or explosion – costing a leader their position or

even the opportunity to ever lead again. Idly ignoring a problem this serious is ministerial malpractice. DMIN leaders have a responsibility to intervene.

Conclusion

Gateway is a diverse ministry training environment. While we often focus on educational program design to address different cultures, races, or ethnicities – character development cuts across all boundaries. Integrity is needed among Koreans and Mexicans.

Inappropriate anger is harmful, whether the person is African-American or Native American. Insecurity producing authoritarianism, wearing whatever mask, undermines Chinese or German leaders. All candidates, from all backgrounds, need to be shaped into the image of Jesus.

Strong DMIN programs must do more than communicate information and improve skills. They must enhance character development of their candidates and give them tools to continue the process over a lifetime of ministry leadership. DMIN candidates have the maturity to understand ministry is more than just “doing leadership.” It also about “becoming” a better person and recognizing how leadership context contributes to this process.

May God give you the grace to model and teach the lifelong process of becoming more and more like Jesus Christ!