

## **The discipline of building character**

By Joseph L Badaracco, Harvard Business Review, March-April, 1998

The author makes a distinction between an ethical decision and a defining moment. An ethical decision involves choosing between right and wrong. During a defining moment, we have to choose between two or more ideals, in which we deeply believe.

Dealing with a defining moment involves a process of probing self-inquiry on the run rather than in quiet seclusion. We must be able to go below the busy superficiality of our daily lives and refocus on our core values and principles. Once uncovered, these values and principles renew our sense of purpose and enable shrewd, pragmatic, politically astute action. By repeating the process through our career, we can create an authentic and strong identity, grow in stature and make the transition from manager to leader.

In the workplace, three kinds of defining moments are common:

- Issues of personal identity- Who am I?
- Issues involving us and the organization- Who are we?
- Issues involving the company's role in society- Who is the company?

When dealing with defining moments, our feelings and intuition can provide intelligence and insight. By framing defining moments in terms of our feelings and intuition, we can also remove the conflict from the business context and bring it to a more manageable, personal level.

When facing a defining moment, we need to ask ourselves: Which of the responsibilities and values that are in conflict are most deeply rooted in my life and in the communities that I care about? We must become aware of which values and commitments really mean the most to us. To succeed, we must negotiate our ethical vision with other stakeholders. Good intentions and well-designed processes alone will not get the work done. The ability to get the key stakeholders on our side is also important.

CEOs who lead an entire organization or senior executives who lead large business units face defining moments that involve multiple stakeholders. To handle such situations, they must plan ahead and enter the defining moment from a position of strength. They must figure who are likely to be the allies and who the opponents. They must anticipate how the opponents will retaliate.

They must be able to gauge how strongly committed are the opponents to their cause. Based on this detailed assessment, they must ask themselves: What combination of shrewdness, creativity and tenacity will make my vision a reality? Should I be bold and upfront like a lion or smart and cunning like a fox?

Defining moments force us to find a balance between our hearts and our jobs. These are opportunities for inspired action and personal growth.