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Conflation of Character and Susceptibility for Treason: Birds of a Feather or Strange Birds?

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Abstract. This article explores the possibility that a conflation of character and susceptibility to treason is harmful to personnel security programs.

Personnel security programs are intended to decrease the probability that an organization's personnel intentionally and unintentionally violate security policies, regulations, and procedures. The assumption is that such violations inexorably and ineluctably harm the security of that organization--viz., elements of its structure, function, and process.

An egregious example of an intentional security violation is the commission of treason--i.e., a betrayal of trust or confidence to purposely harm one's country or aid its enemies against it. Personnel security programs would be applied in selecting and managing personnel at least risk for treason by matching two sets of criteria to the characteristics of these personnel. The first would be a "selecting out" set. Personnel characterized by information in this set would not be selected into the organization or would be selected out if already in it. The second would be a "selecting in" set. Personnel characterized by information in this set would be selected into the organization and would be selected to remain in that organization.

A good character is often within the "select in" criterion set: its converse, a bad character being within the "select out" set. Yet the role of character in personnel security is quite problematic. (1) To some personnel security experts, good character is no more than being unlikely to commit treason, while bad character denotes the converse. The predictor thus becomes no more than another name for what is to be predicted. (2) To some personnel security experts, good character suggests not using illicit drugs, not engaging in various criminal behaviors or proscribed sexual behaviors, or not engaging in other behaviors that might be shown to be linked with the unlikelihood of treason. Bad character suggests the converse. Yet, these behaviors already are separate items in sets of personnel security criteria. Character brings with it no surplus meaning. (3) To some personnel security experts, character--good and bad--denotes some "black box" meaning that has an independent linkage to likelihoods and unlikelihoods of treason. But what this meaning is is unknown. (4) To some personnel security experts, good character is something personnel should have, while bad character is something personnel shouldn't--irrespective of consequences for treason. Such a predilection for a specific kind of personnel can be part of a legitimate human resources decision concerning the culture and image of an organization but may have no bearing on the likelihood of treason.

There are many pathways to treason: money, blackmail, perceived slights, ideology, sensation seeking, and a sense of entitlement being just some of them. The character of character as a treasonous pathway--if not a strange bird--is a red herring. It elusively flies beyond our reach even as it stinks to high heaven. (See Cali, C.C. (1997). Creatures of character: Winning with character education. Professional School Counseling, 1, 19-21; Cournut, J. (1996). Metapsychologie du caractere et permanence des clivages. (Metapsychology of character and permanence of ego splittings.) Revue Francaise de Psychanalyse, 60, 1597-1618; Gerecht, R.M. (September 13 & 20, 1999). What do background checks really check? Just asking. The New Republic, p. 16-20; Hogan, R., & Sinclair, R. (1997).

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For love or money? Character dynamics in consultation. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 49, 256-267; Sperry, L. (1997). Leadership dynamics: Character and character structure in executives. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 49, 268-280.) (Keywords: Character, Personnel Security, Treason.)