

High-Performance Ethics

Book Discussion Questions

Ethics and High Performance: The Remarkable Connection

1. How would you define *ethics*? Is it a code of acceptable conduct? Or is it more than “doing things right?”
2. Is every person born with an innate sense of ethics? If so, what can they do to damage it? To enhance it? If not, how can a person best acquire it?
3. Do you think it is necessary for personal ethics to change when applied in the corporate setting? If so, why? And, how?
4. When many people hear the word “ethics,” they associate it with major failures at the highest levels of organizations. The authors contend that ethics is a ground-level, everyday concept, and a place where organizations and people frequently fail. Do you agree with their assessment? Why?
5. Why do many leaders believe that “being ethical” signals doom for their companies?
6. Jim Lucas says that high-performance ethics are “the way of doing well by doing right?” Do you believe there is a connection between ethics and high performance? Why or why not? If so, how would you describe it?
7. Should an organization be run with a focus on principles or with a focus on performance?

Principle 1: First Things *Only*

1. What is the difference between “first things *only*” and “first things *first*?”
2. In business terms, how would you define *vision* and *mission*? How are they different? Why are they important? Who do you think needs to be part of creating them in your organization?
3. What are your organization’s values? How are they formally defined? How are they defined in practice? How do strong values “make doing business relatively easy?”
4. Why is it difficult to move from “informing” people to “involving” people in a business environment?
5. When you say that a person has character, what do you mean by that?
6. “In a recent survey, 75 percent of employers said they don’t screen effectively for the job applicant’s moral character.” Is this a surprise to you? Why do you think that employers don’t consider a “character check” as essential as, say, a “background check”? How would you go about checking it?

7. Wes Cantrell's experience with Japanese colleagues helped him recognize cultural differences that are integrated into the Japanese business environment. Is there something people in Western organizations can learn to implement from Eastern businesses?
8. What do you think Jim Lucas means by the statement: "Character is what you do *with* the dark"?

Principle 2: Ditch the Distractions

1. Where do you think the business idea of "just focusing on the results" originated?
2. What are the downsides of developing a company strategy with no or little regard to a clear vision or mission?
3. What are CSFs? Why is it critical to identify these in an organization? What should the CSFs for your organization be?
4. Do you think that profit margins must always be the driving force of a business? Why or why not? What *should* the driving force be?
5. Wes Cantrell's dream was to build a company on the basis of a "good name principle." What would it take in your organization to accomplish that?
6. Why do you think most organizations keep the company's strategy a secret from the majority of its employees? What are the effects of that approach? How could an organization best make people aware of their strategy, plans, and goals? How can they create a "clear line-of-sight?"
7. Jim Lucas says that he and his team constantly ask the question, "What are you doing to add or create value?" What are you doing in this regard? What are you doing that could or should be eliminated because it is not adding or creating value?
8. Do you think "employee satisfaction" surveys are helpful? Do you agree that most of them are defective, as the book describes? How can you assure employees that you welcome honest criticism as well as complimentary feedback? What should be done with the results of these surveys?

Principle 3: Align with Reality

1. How would you answer Jim Lucas's question: "How do ethical values become integrated into the fabric of organizational life?"
2. What is wrong with the statement "The foundation of all ethics . . . is the company's code of conduct and compliance policies?" What should the foundation be?

3. One of the concepts that Jim Lucas teaches to leaders worldwide is, “It’s never the wrong time to do the right thing.” Do you agree? How might this look in practice? Are timing and wording and other practical details a reasonable part of living this concept?
4. Wes Cantrell built the Lanier Statement of Principles on the concepts found in the Ten Commandments. Do you think that’s possible with any organization? Why or why not?
5. What is “values drift?” How does it occur? What are its effects? How can it be overcome?
6. What is mentoring? Why is it so important in a business?
7. What does Jim Lucas mean by “aligning with the “Big T” truth?”
8. What is the difference between “positioning” and “spinning?” Create and discuss some examples to illustrate this difference.
9. What are the characteristics of being “reality impaired?” What can an organization do to avoid it or overcome it?

Principle 4: Find Symmetry

1. Jim Lucas says that “Work-life balance is a terrible idea.” Do you agree? Why?
2. Is a “balanced life” synonymous with a “symmetrical life?” Why or why not? Are you affected in a bad way by the 6 drivers on pages 72-73?
3. What is “symmetry?” What would “Whole-Life Symmetry™” look like in practice? How could you incorporate this principle into your own life?
4. What is the connection between someone’s spiritual dimension and mental burnout? Why does striving for symmetry need to begin with a person’s spiritual dimension? What are the causes of burnout? How can we avoid it? What “extraneous stuff” could you eliminate from your life?
5. Take a look at the list of “tough questions” on pages 75–76. Have you ever asked yourself any of these questions? Are there additional questions you can add to the list? Do you see yourself implementing these easily, or will it be a struggle?
6. Are priority lists beneficial or detrimental? Explain.
7. Have you ever considered incorporating a weekly pit stop into your life? What would it look like? What would you like it to accomplish?
8. How do you envision your retirement? Does the concept of “whole-life symmetry” change your retirement plan in any way?

Principle 5: Respect the Wise

1. What does “mentoring is the default position” mean? How can it also be true that “Good mentors are mentors by choice”?
2. How do we know who we should listen to? Whom we should allow to mentor us?
3. Is being a coach and being a mentor the same job description? Why or why not? Do we need both in our lives? Why?
4. What do you think are the key characteristics an effective mentor must have? How could you apply those in your organization?
5. Using the “Mentoring Evaluation” on page 98, evaluate your supervisor at work or someone else in a position of authority in your life. Where are they strongest? How can you help them maximize the effects of these attributes? Where are they weakest? What can you do to help them be more effective mentors in these areas?
6. Sometimes you may find yourself working for an unwise leader. What do you need to do to survive that situation? What do you need to do to prosper in that situation?
7. How could you use the list of “mentoring objectives” on pages 106–107 to enhance the life of someone at work? Someone in another area of your life?

Principle 6: Protect the Souls

1. How would you define “ambition?” Is ambition good or bad? What is the difference between “ethical ambition” and “unethical ambition?”
2. What are the benefits of “starting at the bottom” of an organization?
3. Jim Lucas says, “Arrogance is always founded on ignorance.” Do you agree? Why?
4. Describe the differences between “confidence” and “arrogance.” What safeguards can we build into our lives to keep us from becoming arrogant without damaging our confidence?
5. What would “humility” look like in practice in an organizational setting? How can we ensure that we have a good blend of humility and confidence in our lives? How does this blend produce “healthy, ethical ambition?”
6. Wes Cantrell says “Failure is an excellent platform for learning.” Do you agree or disagree with that statement? What have you learned from your failures? What would you say to someone else to help them profit from those mistakes?
7. Do you agree with Jim Lucas’s definition of success: “Getting outstanding results through passion, clear thinking, competence, hard work, and high-performance ethics”? What would you change or add?

8. Lucas says, “War can teach us many things, but it provides a bad analogy for dealing with others in life and business.” What can it teach us? Why is it a bad analogy for interpersonal relationships?

Principle 7: Commit to the Relationships

1. What does “commitment” mean in an organizational setting? What is the “relationship principle?” How would “commit to the relationships” look in your current work situation?
2. Successful mergers and acquisitions (M&A) are difficult to achieve. What have the authors identified as some red flags to avoid when striving for such a relationship?
3. Describe a situation where two organizations, divisions, departments, or teams were brought together? If it worked well, what were the reasons? If it failed, what were the reasons?
4. M&As involve tangibles (a work force, a physical plant) and intangibles (vision, values, etc.). How can these very different components be integrated smoothly? What would be the top 3-5 components of an “integration plan?”
5. Communication is essential for M&As, but it’s not the only thing that makes them work. What else is necessary?
6. Why is it a good idea, when bringing people or organizations together, to “assume friction on all points?” How can we balance “integration” and “independence?”
7. Look at the list of essential qualities for a successful team on page 146. Do you agree with this list? Are there any qualities that you disagree with? Are there any qualities you might want to add?

Principle 8: Spread the Wealth

1. Is money good or bad? Why? What can we do to make it “good?”
2. Do you agree with Jim Lucas that “spreading the wealth outside an organization’s borders is a brilliant thing to do”? How can we help our partners produce wealth?
3. What are the components of a “win-win deal?” Why is spreading the wealth a two-way street? Why are relationships better built on “mutually reinforcing attitudes and actions” rather than on “unequal relationships of power and control?”
4. Do you or your organization reward good ideas that your employees or outside partners might share with the organization?

5. How important do you think a sense of courtesy is in business dealings? A sense of humor?
6. In your thinking, is taking wealth from others a blueprint for disaster? Why?
7. What is meant by “an engine of value”? What do you think fuels it?

Principle 9: Speak the Truth

1. How can we and our organizations “place a premium on truth?”
2. Is speaking the truth welcomed or frowned upon in your organization? Why does speaking the truth take moral courage? How can speaking the truth create enemies?
3. What is the “grapevine?” What things contribute to an active grapevine? How can we minimize its power?
4. Why is it crucial to confront liars and/or backbiters in your organization quickly? Do you agree with Jim Lucas’s assertion, “If I don’t confront, I will resent?”
5. What does Peter Drucker say is the primary leadership skill? Do you agree with him? How could that be practiced in your organization?
6. What do you think of the “Tell It to Wes” hotline idea? Do you have something similar in your organization? If not, is that something you could see helping your organization?
7. Do you agree with the test for outside consultants and advisors on pages 188–189? How does this differ from the criteria your organization currently uses?
8. Why is speaking the truth so important? How does speaking the truth create high performance?

Principle 10: Limit Your Desires

1. Why does “keeping your desires in check” make sense? How can it lead to “greater long-term wealth and stability?”
2. How can self-denial lead to high performance?
3. Do you agree that limiting your desires is a way to deep satisfaction? How? How would you explain the paradox, “the way to have the desire of our hearts . . . is to limit our desires?”
4. What is the difference between “limiting our desires” and “limiting our options?”
5. What false messages are wrapped up in greed?
6. Do you agree that “the desire to *do* is better than the desire to *have*.” Has that been true in your own life? How?

Conclusion: Ethical Leadership for the 21st Century

1. How would you answer the question “What are you really worth?” Looking at some of the key components of “worth on pages 209–210, what can you do today to start increasing your “net worth?”
2. What have you learned in the School of Hard Knocks? What insights would you like to pass on to others?
3. Take a look at the list of the “Big Seven” challenges on page 215. Can you identify with any of these struggles? What have you done to overcome them?
4. When Wes Cantrell decided to retire, he made a complete break from Lanier. He knew his identity was not in being a CEO. What is your identity?
5. What do you think of the concept of “systematic, repeatable retirement?” Does that make sense to you? Think “blue sky” and discuss how that could look in your own life.
6. What is your “next opportunity?” How can you begin to plant seeds today for your next life adventure?
7. What can you do where you are right now to become, and be recognized for being, an ethical, high-performance leader?