



STORY

# High Schoolers Learn About Virtue

**Students wanted an education about virtue because these ideas were missing in their curriculum.**

Consider this story about the pursuit of virtue. A group of high school students used virtue to better understand organizations and themselves. It all started when a high school junior heard what his father learned at work about the virtues in a seminar that embraces and teaches the virtues as the foundation for performance. His son became intrigued and read the book about virtue-based performance, *Exception to the Rule*. He then asked his father to introduce him to an author of the book to learn how to launch a club where students studied and practiced virtue.

Imagine this. High school students wanted to learn how to practice virtue because it was intrinsically meaningful to them. Rather than limit their education to extrinsic goals such as grades, advanced placement classes, and college applications, they wanted to become better humans. Students wanted an education about virtue because these ideas were missing in their curriculum.

Their school's mission was to "inspire and empower learners," though the school (in its compliance mindset) required a teacher to over-see all clubs.

Finding a teacher who could empower students to learn and practice virtue was a challenge. They called their initiative an "innovative leadership club" so that the request wasn't rejected because of the word "virtue." It seems curious to imagine that the word virtue would be a liability rather than an asset, but this serves as a reminder that the virtues – though time-honored – are still



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foreign and perhaps even threatening in many organizations, including many high schools.

In the end, these students reported that they learned how internal changes to their character can yield external results. They found a teacher who was willing to endorse the group but stepped aside so they could self-manage their club. These empowered students adjusted to COVID-19 by delivering content on-line. They designed activities like this one:

- Think about the people who are closest to you in life. Use the “trust-to-distrust” spectrum, and consider the question: “Where would your closest family and friends place you?”
- Reflect on your strengths and where you want to get better.

After studying virtue, the students reached several conclusions about what happens when the virtues are absent, including:

- Self-centered leaders who lacked virtue created dysfunctional cultures.
- Self-centered leaders created close-minded, toxic cultures where people distrust each other and their customers.

- When team members don’t have faith in each other, there is no shared purpose. People hide mistakes and lie to superiors. When this happens, people work for a paycheck, not the company. They are less likely to perform at their best or stay in the organization.

In contrast, when the virtues are present, the students noted real benefits:

- When virtues like trust are present, teams work harder and are more productive, creative, and collaborative.
- When this happens, virtue becomes a reality that people can see and feel.

The purpose of this story is not to disparage high schools. Rather, the purpose is to demonstrate that students want to learn and practice virtue in ways traditional curricula don’t support. Sadly, schools must comply with legislative mandates to test students on what they know using curricula that are silent on the issue of building character.

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1. Rea, P., Stoller, J. and Kolp, A. (2022). *Better Humans, Better Performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.