

What ancient wisdom and science know about drivers to high performance in organisations

Peter Rea,¹ Alan Kolp,² James K Stoller³

¹Better Humans, Better Performance, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

²Faculty in Residence, Baldwin Wallace University, Berea, Kentucky, USA

³Cleveland Clinic, Jean Wall Bennett Professor of Medicine and Samson Global Leadership Academy Endowed Chair, Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Correspondence to

Dr James K Stoller;
STOLLEJ@ccf.org

Received 29 October 2025
Accepted 8 May 2026

ABSTRACT

First principles are foundational building blocks from which all other knowledge, decisions and actions flow. In medicine, this means starting with the most basic, undeniable reality: the human body seeks homeostasis and healing. Regarding performance and relationships, virtue is the foundational truth that drives excellence. The seven classical virtues are trust, compassion, courage, justice, wisdom, temperance and hope. This perspective cites experiential evidence that adherence to the seven classical virtues drives high performance in organisations including in healthcare. The virtues provide a common language that leaders can espouse to release discretionary effort in their organisation—people will do the right thing when no one is watching. Examples are replete in healthcare. Trust among team members undergirds high performance in the Intensive Care Unit. Surgical outcomes are enhanced when team members know and care for one another, exemplifying compassion. At the same time, virtue-based leadership is not about sainthood. Practising the virtues is a lifelong aspiration and is action-based. It is not a virtue until you act. The perspective offers practical tools by which the virtues can be enacted. Creating a common language of the virtues can cascade awareness through the organisation. Deepening trust by practising gratitude can enhance psychological safety, which is associated with high performance. Finally, defining and weakening restraining forces like pressure to perform, time limitations, focus on short versus long-term actions and fear can then be weakened by integrating virtue habits into daily operations.

WHAT ARE FIRST PRINCIPLES?

First principles are fundamental truths or basic assumptions that cannot be deduced from any other proposition. They serve as foundational building blocks from which all other knowledge, decisions and actions flow. In medicine, this means starting with the most basic, undeniable reality: the human body seeks homeostasis and healing. This is not derived from theory but observed directly—wounds heal, bones mend and immune systems fight infection. In physics, first principles include the laws of thermodynamics. In mathematics, they include axioms like ‘things equal to the same thing are equal to each other.’ These principles are irreducible—they cannot be broken down further while maintaining their essential truth.

Regarding performance and relationships, virtue is the foundational truth that drives excellence.¹ Aristotle’s concept is that virtue is the foundation of human flourishing. The seven classical virtues of trust, compassion, courage, justice, wisdom,

temperance and hope are not abstract ideals but practical standards of excellence and human thriving. The word classical means these virtues are universally admired across geographic borders and throughout time.² Adherence to trust, compassion, courage, justice, wisdom, temperance and hope drives high performance in healthcare.

Evidence that virtues drive high performance

Virtue as first principle is not merely philosophical—it is evolutionary. In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin argued that human morality evolved from social instincts—behaviours that promote cooperation and the welfare of others within a group.³ He believed these instincts, shared in simpler forms with other animals, developed through natural selection because they strengthened social bonds and improved group survival. Thus, moral sentiments have a biological basis rooted in humanity’s evolutionary past.^{4,5}

The performance case for virtue is irrefutable.

A 3-year study by 55 respected social scientists examined 2500 years of ancient wisdom alongside modern social science research to confirm that virtue is the key to human flourishing.⁶ James Heckman won a Nobel Prize by demonstrating that noncognitive skills such as character predicted personal, academic and job performance more than cognitive skills such as intelligence.⁷ West Point’s Mike Matthews coined the 25/75 rule: 25% of academic and job performance is explained by cognitive skills, while 75% is attributed to noncognitive skills such as character and commitment. Meanwhile, Leadership IQ followed 20 000 people over 18 months and showed that 89% of job terminations were for reasons of character not competence.⁸ It follows that a recommended recruitment strategy is to hire for character and train for competence.¹

Yet a persistent cultural gap remains. As David Brooks has observed, we are far more skilled at building resume virtues—the skills the marketplace rewards—than eulogy virtues, those qualities we hope will define how we lived our life. While we know that eulogy virtues are more important than resume virtues, we invest in careers more than character.⁹ Current data underscore the urgency: a 2026 How Institute study of more than 2500 people found that 94% believe the need for organisations to prioritise moral leadership in hiring and promotion was urgent. This finding is consistent year over year, reflecting enduring expectation, not a passing trend. Yet, only 6% of CEOs and 9% of managers were evaluated at the highest tier of moral leadership.¹⁰ Demand for virtue in leadership is overwhelming; the supply remains scarce.

To cite: Rea P, Kolp A, Stoller JK. *BMJ Leader* Published Online First: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/leader-2025-001477

As a small sample of the total body of evidence, these observations make it clear that when it comes to performance, virtue is a 'must have,' not a 'nice to have.' Ultimately, virtue is about pro- social behaviour—and virtue is the best pro- social behaviour ever invented by humans. Paradoxically, these insights about virtue date to Aristotle, Confucius, Lao Tse and other time- honoured leaders,² yet the insight is often hidden in full view and often escapes organisational attention. When virtue is absent, relationships and performance are diminished. When leaders create a common language of the seven classical virtues and model behaviours that embody these virtues, discretionary effort in the organisation is released—people will do the right thing when no one is looking—and high performance results.^{1,2} Whetstone's research on virtue and managerial excellence offers a compelling bridge between ethics and practice.¹¹ His research revealed that virtues provide managers with a practical language of excellence—one that makes character-based expectations concrete, communicable and assessable across an organisation. When leaders name specific virtues and apply them deliberately, they transform abstract ethical ideals into operational standards. This virtue-language framework equips leaders not only to model excellence but to name and amplify when we practice virtue well. The sections that follow explore how this common language works in practice.

Importance of common language

We cannot hit a target that we cannot see. Excellence demands definition, and that definition is virtue. Teams and cultures that adopt memorable catchphrases that exemplify virtue create both communication speed and clarity about excellence.

- ▶ *Trust is efficient*—when people can rely on each other, decisions happen faster, execution improves and money is saved. To quote retired US General Jim Mattis, "operations occur at the speed of trust."¹²
- ▶ *Compassion: service before self*—the more other- focused we are, the tougher we are; the more self- absorbed we are, the more fragile we become. High- performing teams like the US Navy Sea, Air and Land exemplify this principle.¹
- ▶ *Courage: do the hard right, not the easy wrong*—courage is not the absence of fear; it is striving to do what is right despite uncontrollable risk. Courage replaces easy comfortable decisions with hard uncomfortable ones.
- ▶ *Justice: live by conviction, not circumstance*—maintain consistent commitment and practice of virtue regardless of external pressures.
- ▶ *Wisdom: strive to understand rather than be understood—when rules are enforced without respect, rebellion is likely.*
- ▶ *Temperance: calm is contagious*—the practice of virtue makes us predictable to each other, which is especially important when the environment is unpredictable.
- ▶ *Hope: be better, not bitter*—hope replaces victimhood with agency and growth. We adopt realistic optimism that defines boundaries that cannot be changed while focusing on where we have control and influence.

Few dispute the value of virtue when they are pointed out, though they are often hidden in plain sight. The challenge is practising virtue when pressure mounts—when deadlines crush, conflicts ignite and stress overwhelms. In these crucible moments, our default programming can undermine our noble aspirations. Our destiny is directed by where we place our attention and what we do repeatedly.

Under pressure we default to our training

Virtue presents a fundamental paradox: while concepts like trust, courage and compassion are widely understood in theory, consistently practising these virtues proves extraordinarily difficult. The real challenge emerges under pressure—when we are tired, stressed or disappointed by others—and sustained virtuous action requires effort that most people struggle to maintain.

Crisis moments expose a fundamental choice: do we elevate or do we degrade? When we elevate others—listening to their concerns and building trust—people become more willing to accept change. When we degrade others through blame and humiliation, resistance hardens. The path of human-centred virtue smooths our journey through uncertainty and stress; retreating from virtue makes every challenge harder.

Here's virtue's cruel joke: we need it most when we least want to practise it. You cannot control market crashes, toxic coworkers or life's slings and arrows, but you can control how you respond. That control is where practising the virtues becomes real.

In defining character as a commitment to practise virtues, how do you build character? General Stanley McChrystal thinks of character as a maths formula: conviction × self-discipline = character.¹³ Without discipline, good intentions are worthless. Without conviction, even rigorous effort can lead down destructive paths. But multiply them together? You get sustainable growth, one choice at a time. A 3-year study on character, culture and leadership in UK business confirmed this clearly: character is central to good leadership. The study concluded that organisations invest endlessly in strategy and performance. What if organisations invested as deeply in culture and character?¹⁴

Virtue strengthens relationships when they are needed most

Lifewell-lived

Since 1939, Harvard investigators have followed the same cohort of people and now study their offspring. This research concluded that the best predictor of how long we will live and how well we will live is the quality of our relationships.¹⁵ People with strong social connections recover faster from illness, experience less depression and maintain cognitive function longer. In contrast, loneliness and social isolation are America's greatest health risks according to two-time Surgeon General Vivek Murthy; loneliness poses the same risk to longevity as smoking or obesity.¹⁶

Stress management

Stress is our response to an event, not the event itself. This explains the wide variance in how people show up under similar experiences. What differentiates performance under pressure is the quality of our relationships. When facing major project deadlines, teams with strong relationships can share the load, offer mutual support and problem- solve together. Toxic stress comes from navigating events alone—isolation amplifies pressure and diminishes our capacity to respond effectively. Strong relationships are built on virtues like trust, compassion and hope.

What followers want from leaders

Between 2005 and 2008, more than 10 000 followers across 16 nations were asked what they most wanted from their leaders. Independent of nationality, followers consistently wanted leaders who cultivated trust, compassion, stability and hope—three out of four are virtues.¹⁷ Leaders who focus on strategy and compensation alone may find this surprising; yet people rarely give their best to those who do not genuinely care about them.

Team performance

Google's study showed that the best predictor of team performance is how people treat each other, not team composition.¹⁸ Amy Edmondson's research has shown that teams with psychological safety—defined by vulnerable leaders who ask questions and focus on learning—outperform groups of individually talented people who humiliate, blame and ignore each other.¹⁹ Gallup data have shown that 70% of the variance in employee engagement stems from the relationship between leader and team member,²⁰ while Massachusetts Institutes of Technology research found that 66% of return on investment is attributable to the leader and team—only 33% to strategy.²¹ This implication is investors are betting on people, not plans. Finally, in healthcare and other sectors, Gittell has shown that high relational coordination—"the mutually reinforcing process of communicating with others and relating for the purpose of task integration"—is tightly associated with better performance, including in airline operations and surgical outcomes.²²

Watch any high-performing team and you will see something counterintuitive: they do not chase perfection. Instead, they have learnt to work with their flaws, pivot when plans fail and follow good ideas regardless of who suggests them. This behaviour requires courage and humility.

What is the secret ingredient that undergirds this behaviour? The answer: virtue as their operating system. Trust creates psychological safety for quick pivots. Compassion transforms mistakes into growth. Courage breaks down hierarchical barriers. Justice ensures that everyone's contributions count. Wisdom sorts the controllable from the uncontrollable. Temperance prevents panic during setbacks. Hope powers persistence through ambiguity. Think of all the applications to healthcare, which is experiencing unprecedented stress in the crush to achieve the highest safety and quality and to make care universally available while preserving cost.

The golden mean: virtue through balance

Central to virtue as a first principle is Aristotle's doctrine of the golden mean,²³ which teaches that virtue lies between extremes of excess and deficiency. This balanced approach of moderation becomes crucial during high-pressure situations when we are most likely to swing toward destructive extremes. This table (table 1) considers virtue at the extremes of excess and deficiency and at the golden mean. Liken this to the childhood story of Goldilocks—virtue should neither be too hot nor too cold, but just right.

Aristotle distinguished between relationships based on utility, pleasure and virtue—with only virtue-based connections providing the depth needed during genuine hardship. Superficial relationships often fracture under pressure, but connections built on mutual character development become stronger through shared adversity.

Practising virtue improves our conduct, which enhances our performance and deepens our relationships. Strong relationships provide the foundation for facing future challenges with better conduct and higher performance. Character ultimately determines how effectively we navigate whatever adversity life brings. The first principle of character—defined by virtue—is that character is our most practical tool for achieving sustainable excellence in an unpredictable world.

Virtue as a common language of excellence

Among the virtues' greatest practical values is that they offer a common language by which we can enhance and assess excellent performance. Under pressure, how well did we elevate or degrade our relationships? When a team can collectively recognise that a decision lacks courage or that a response shows deficient trust, they can identify specific paths forward. This common language transforms virtue from abstract philosophy into practical methodology—a shared compass for navigating toward excellence in performance and relationships.

Virtue is not a state that we achieve. We learn virtue through conscious choice, gradually building habits formed by where we put our attention and what we practise. The reverse is equally true: distrust, indifference and cowardice also develop based on where we put—or fail to put—our attention and repeated practice.

Importantly, just recognising the value of virtue does not make us virtuous. It is not a virtue until you act. Even the best among us will not practise virtue all the time. This insight takes some of the pressure off—this is not about achieving sainthood. It is about being mindful of the virtues and aspiring to their practice. Virtue can sharpen our focus when, not if, things go sideways, and can provide extra energy to take on tasks that are important and hard. At least we know that virtue is always an option.

Rumi, a 13th-century poet, captured human limitations this way: "Each one of us is a jackass, with wings of angels tacked on."²⁴ We are a complex blend of the unwise—the jackass—and the wise—the angel. When governed by our lower impulses, we crawl. When governed by our higher nature, we soar.

Table 1 Virtue at extremes and at the golden mean

Virtue(s)	When missing under pressure	When present in excess	At the golden mean
Trust and compassion	Blame-shifting, cover-ups and inefficiency plague the team.	Excessive trust becomes naïve when real problems are ignored. Excessive compassion becomes enabling.	High support with high standards.
Courage and hope	Deficient courage becomes cowardice and deficient hope leads to despair.	Excessive courage makes the team reckless. Excessive hope becomes unrealistic optimism that ignores constraints.	Realistic optimism that defines what cannot be changed while focusing energy on areas of genuine agency.
Justice, wisdom and temperance	Teams rush to judgement when errors occur and deliver feedback that alienates team members.	Too much wisdom and temperance can lead to paralysis; too much wisdom and temperance can fixate on reflection even when immediate action is needed.	Wisdom ensures that people feel heard and understood to determine an appropriate response; temperance prevents overwhelming them or withholding essential information. Justice is the exception to excess and deficiency. In an unjust world is it possible to have too much justice?

What are the takeaways for high performance in healthcare? The time-honoured classical virtues—trust, compassion, justice, wisdom, courage, temperance and hope—though often overlooked, provide a common language that impacts performance whether or not leaders and teams are paying attention. Once we understand that the word virtue means excellence, it comes as no surprise, then, that practising virtue is associated with high team performance. Practising virtues requires intentionality, which unlocks people's discretionary effort that leads to high performance. We perform well in any conditions when our default training is to practise virtue in the face of stress, pressure and adversity.

A 3-year study at a multinational company found that employee engagement initially dropped after leaders adopted virtuous leadership behaviours, then increased by 20% once employees confirmed the commitment was genuine. This pattern reveals that meaningful engagement improvements require sustained virtuous leadership, not temporary initiatives that employees will dismiss as fleeting.²⁵

Four practical tools for building Virtue-Based performance

Adopt virtue as common language

Use the aforementioned catch phrases to make virtue actionable.

- **Virtue moments (5 min):** identify teammates who exhibited specific virtues that strengthened the team and improved results.
- **Lunch and learns (voluntary):** for each virtue, explore three questions that in this example is applied to courage:
 - When have you seen someone do the hard right rather than the easy wrong?
 - Why does courage matter to our work?
 - How do we practise courage at the golden mean—avoiding both recklessness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency)?

Build trust through three practices

Accelerate trust

Vulnerability opens the door to trust. Start meetings with each person sharing their 4Hs: history, heroes, heartbreaks and hopes. Balance: share vulnerably without oversharing—use wisdom to set boundaries.

Deepen trust

Practice gratitude—evidence shows that gratitude cultivates hope, meaning and resilience. The root of gratitude is grace: genuinely appreciating another's actions. Balance: gratitude is most powerful when unexpected; excessive praise without high standards erodes impact.

Restore trust

When trust breaks (for example, during layoffs), try the 3As:

- **Apologise:** clarify that the person did nothing wrong.
- **Acknowledge:** recognise the impact on the person—financial, professional, emotional.
- **Atone:** help them find their next opportunity.

Balance: avoid promises that cannot be delivered while delivering on those that can.

Create psychological safety

Psychological safety cultivates all the virtues—courage and hope in particular. The goal is motivation and accountability for results, not psychological safety as an endpoint. The goal is candour, not comfort; team psychological safety, not necessarily with every teammate. It is about replacing humiliating, blaming,

and ignoring with the wisdom of vulnerability, questioning and learning.

► **Balance:** being overly nice prevents growth; being harsh prevents innovation.

Remove restraining forces

Do not push virtue—everyone wants to work on trusting, fair, hopeful teams. Instead, identify and weaken what restrains us: time limitations, pressure to perform and fear of failure. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman credited psychologist Kurt Lewin with one of psychology's best ideas: behaviour is held in equilibrium between driving forces that push us toward change and restraining forces that hold us back. Leaders instinctively add more driving forces—arguments, incentives, threats—but Kahneman's insight is that doing so increases tension rather than resolves it, distorting the situation like pressure applied to opposite sides of a ball. Instead, ask two questions: (1) what forces are restraining you from practising virtue? (2) How can you weaken these forces?²⁶ Virtue habits, built through deliberate practice that define and weaken restraining forces move us a step closer toward excellence. Furthermore, integrate new habits into existing priorities and activities rather than adding more tasks.

The bottom line

In healthcare's unprecedented pressure to deliver quality, access and affordability, virtue-based culture provides the most practical tool for sustainable excellence. Virtue is not about perfection—it is about intentionality. Where we place our attention and what we practise determines who we become. As Confucius said, "All people are the same; only their habits differ."²⁷

Contributors Guarantor is JKS All authors are responsible for the entire content of this manuscript.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests Dr. JKS is a member of the BMJ Leader editorial board. PR and AK do not have competing interests.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Ethics approval Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data availability statement No data are available.

ORCID iD

James K Stoller <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9636-5770>

REFERENCES

- 1 Rea P, Stoller JK, Kolp A. *Better humans, better performance: Driving leadership, teamwork, and culture with intentionality*. McGraw-Hill, 2023.
- 2 Rea P, Stoller JK, Kolp A. *Exception to the rule: The surprising science of character-based culture, engagement, and performance*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2018.
- 3 Darwin C. *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*. John Murray, 1871. Available: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/24784>
- 4 Christakis NA. *Blueprint: the evolutionary origins of a good society*. Little, Brown Spark, 2020.
- 5 Sacks J. *Morality: restoring the common good in divided times*. Basic Books, 2020.
- 6 Peterson C, Seligman MEP. *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press; American Psychological Association, 2004.
- 7 Heckman J, Humphries J, Kautz T. *The myth of achievement tests*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- 8 Murphy M. *Hiring for attitude*. McGraw-Hill, 2017.
- 9 Brooks D. The moral bucket list. *The New York Times*; 2015.
- 10 Seidman D. The state of moral leadership in business 2026. HOW Institute. Available: <https://thehowinstitute.org/state-of-moral-leadership-in-business-2026/>
- 11 Whetstone JT. The Language of Managerial Excellence: Virtues as Understood and Applied. *J Bus Ethics* 2003;44:343–57.

- 12 Available: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/12203436-operations-occur-at-the-speed-of-trust> [Accessed 30 Sep 2025].
- 13 McChrystal S. *On character*. Random House, 2025.
- 14 Brooks E. The character project. oxford university/forward institute. Supported by the John Templeton Foundation; 2023.
- 15 Waldinger R, Schulz M. *The good life: Lessons from the world's longest scientific study of happiness*. Simon & Schuster, 2023.
- 16 Murthy V. My parting prescription for America. 2025. Available: <https://www.vivekmurthy.com/partingprescription>
- 17 Brim BJ. *Sentence case: Strengths-based leadership: The 4 things followers need*. Gallup: Clifton Strengths, 2015.
- 18 Google. Project aristotle. Re:Work; 2012. Available: <https://rework.withgoogle.com/print/guides/5721312655835136>
- 19 Edmondson A. *The fearless organization: creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. Wiley, 2018.
- 20 Managers account for 70% in variance of employee engagement. Gallup Business Journal; 2015. Available: <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/182792/managers-account-variance-employee-engagement.aspx>
- 21 Aulet B. *Entrepreneurship and Innovation at MIT*. 2015.
- 22 Gittel JH. *High performance healthcare: using the power of relationships to achieve quality, efficiency and resilience*. In: McGraw- Hill. 2009.
- 23 Gasser- Wingate M. Aristotle on Induction and First Principles. *Philosophers' Imprint* 2016;16.
- 24 Safi O. The problematic idea of success. *On Being*; 2016.
- 25 Steward MD, Brower HH, Rea P. Patiently winning through virtuous leadership: The impact of virtuous leadership behavior on employee engagement across time. *Journal of General Management* 2024.
- 26 Thinking KD. *Fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.
- 27 Available: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/808879-all-people-are-the-same-only-their-habits-differ> [Accessed 22 Oct 2025].