
Summary of Questions of Character Joseph L. Badaracco Jr

Chapter two of Questions of Character by Joseph L. Badaracco Jr. discusses moral codes and how leaders develop their own. Badaracco uses the story Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe to illustrate his message. The story centers around the leader of an African tribe named Okonkwo who is the “psychological and emotional counterpart of the strong, determined people who run most organizations today” (Badaracco, p. 31-32). At first, he is exactly the type of leader his tribe is looking for due to his strong moral compass. When the British attempt to change their way of life, Okonkwo tries to have his clan follow him in opposition. However, his tribe eventually rejects his leadership because his moral code “did not grow and evolve over the years” (Badaracco, p. 32). What originally made Okonkwo a great leader, turned “out to be signs of weakness, not strength (Badaracco, p. 32).

This story demonstrates the complexities of a leader’s moral code. Due to these complexities “it is critical for men and women in positions of responsibility to reflect, from time to time, on the soundness of their moral codes” (Badaracco, p. 34). Okonkwo’s life “offers several basic ways for leaders to test the soundness of their own deep convictions” (Badaracco, p. 51). His story also “warns us against viewing moral codes as simple, mechanistic devices” (Badaracco, p. 51). It is dangerous for a leader to think they are acting morally just because they believe they have a strong moral code. According to Badaracco (2006), a solid moral code has its roots in what the community values. It is dynamic and “requires an ongoing, open engagement with the moral and practical life that surrounds a leader” (Badaracco, p. 52). It is revealed in a leader’s failures as well as their reactions to them. Badaracco believes that flexibility is “the clearest sign of a good moral code” (Badaracco, p. 52). Okonkwo was so firm in his own beliefs that he ignored those around him that could have helped him develop this flexibility.

Discussion Questions

1. How was Okonkwo in the story Things Fall Apart similar to the leaders of today’s organizations?

He was a hard worker whose drive and determination lead him to the top of his community. He was “the psychological and emotional counterpart of the strong, determined people who run most organizations today” (Badaracco, p. 32).

2. What do good leaders do when faced with their own failures?

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Good leaders “reflect on their reactions to them; they also look for explanations, and they start by looking at themselves rather than blaming others” (Badaracco, p. 41).

3. What are the three standards that can be used to judge the features of one’s moral code?

The fundamental features “can be judged by three standards: clarity, motive, and dominance” (Badaracco, p. 43).

4. Why did Okonkwo fail when he attempted to act on his insights as a leader?

Okonkwo did not vocalize his values and his code of ethics was not for a changing world. He needed “the ability to crystallize and powerfully communicate his convictions and ideas – in ways that resonated with the values and feeling of the people he wanted to lead” (Badaracco, p. 50).

5. What does the story of Okonkwo’s life tell us and warn us against?

His life reveals the complexities of one’s moral code. It “shows us the importance of a leader’s moral code and offers several basic ways for leaders to test the soundness of their own deep convictions” (Badaracco, p. 51). His story also “warns us against viewing moral codes as simple, mechanistic devices” (Badaracco, p. 51).

6. What does Badaracco believe a sound moral code resembles?

He compares a solid moral code to an “old, weathered tree” (Badaracco, p. 51). It has “deep roots in the values of communities and in the lives of their leaders” (Badaracco, p. 51). A good moral code also “grows and evolves with time” (Badaracco, p. 51).

Practical Applications

One of the main ideas that this chapter discusses is that leaders must continuously reevaluate their moral codes. It is important that they do not become stuck on their past beliefs because “the clearest sign of a good moral code is flexibility rather than firmness” (Badaracco, p. 52). Flexibility allows leaders to examine situations and act accordingly. A static moral code can lead to the downfall of well-meaning leaders.

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