

The Education of Character

A Conversation with Chris Widener, coauthor of 12 Pillars of Success

By John David Mann



Chris Widener knows the meaning of education: his life has been an object lesson of using learning to overcome one intractable obstacle after another. When he was just four years old, his father died suddenly; five years later he was removed from his family to live with relatives, and soon his life was embroiled with drugs and alcohol. From this cocoon of addiction and despair Chris eventually emerged as an inspirational speaker devoted to the mission of raising up a new generation of leadership.

Chris has been speaking professionally since 1988 and has shared the stage with US Presidential candidates, nationally-known television news anchors, best-selling authors and star athletes. He has written 450 articles and six books, and has produced close to 40 audio programs on leadership and motivation, including best-sellers in Costco and Sam's Club. His newsletter, "The Chris Widener Weekly E-zine," has subscribers in 105 countries, making it one of the world's most widely distributed newsletters on success and leadership. His articles appear monthly in close to 100 publications. Chris has also worked closely with his two mentors, legendary leadership experts John Maxwell and Jim Rohn, and is the featured contributing editor to the Jim Rohn One-Year Success Plan. —JDM

How did you come to your career in teaching and training?

I started in the ministry for 14 years. I was a very entrepreneurial minister; I started three different churches over the course of 11 years. During that time I also started writing a column on the Internet, writing about success, motivation, personal development and leadership. Over the years, I built up a library of about 450 articles.

As the Internet started to take off, content became king. I was giving away all my content, allowing people to use my articles for free, and as a result, I ended up with thousands and thousands of e-zines and Web sites all over the Internet utilizing my content on personal development. More or less by accident, I had created a "brand" and made my name fairly well known.

So pretty soon you were in demand!

That's right. I started getting speaking requests from all sorts of people, everyone from small local groups to companies like General Electric and Cisco Systems and even Harvard Business School. I soon reached the point where I needed to make a career decision. I felt so

passionate about personal development that I left being a pastor and went into speaking full-time.

Tell us the background of your new book, 12 Pillars of Success.

The “12 Pillars” are actually the 12 principles that form the basis of the program I wrote with Jim Rohn, the “Jim Rohn One-Year Success Plan.” This is a 12-month program we designed to take people through every aspect of personal development, from finances, time management and sales to relationships and leadership. We bring the top experts onto our conference calls—people like Zig Ziglar, Nido Qubein, Mark Sanborn, Brian Tracy—along with our own weekly e-mails and monthly programs.

And you fictionalized your training program?

We decided to create a way to give people a bite-sized experience of the program, in the context of an imaginary tale. It’s the story of a 40-year-old man whose car breaks down next to a plantation-style mansion built with 12 pillars across the front. The gardener helps him fix up his car, begins explaining how the house was built on 12 pillars to remind the owner of the 12 principles one has to master in life, and ends up passing on a whole series of life lessons.

What kind of people go through your course?

CEOs, small business owners...anyone who wants to grow personally. Of course, a lot of network marketers.

Paul Pilzer says the number one economic opportunity in today’s economy is teaching. Do you see a shift in the significance of education in our adult world?

Absolutely. Everything is changing so fast today the average person has five, six, seven or more different job changes over the course of a career—sometimes changing careers entirely. Obviously, there are some skills that are transferable from career to career, such as being personable and maintaining a positive attitude. But education is what allows you to stay fluid in a rapidly changing world.

And there’s such an overwhelming amount of new information today. The people who are really going to succeed are those who can extract from all that information the most important parts and apply them.

That doesn’t seem like an ability most formal education imparts.

A lot of education is based purely on the passing on of rote information. There are some in the formal education community who get it, though.

When I spoke at Harvard Business School, I spent a few days there observing, and it was fascinating. I asked them, “What kind of books do you read?” They said they really didn’t use books much. “Really?! Well, what do you do?!” They told me, they read case studies of real, live business situations—all with an emphasis on leadership, which I thought was fascinating.

Half their grade is based on being tested on the material they’ve studied; the other half is based on their standing up and making a compelling case for their arguments, asking good and informed questions. To me, that’s a brilliant way of sending out leaders who are ready to work with the real world—because what they study is real-world stuff.

You often see a beginning network marketer dump a ton of information on the unwitting prospect—an ineffective approach at best. What do we need to know about how people learn to become effective teachers?

There are a few key things you have to get right to effectively transfer information to another, whether it's giving information to brand new prospects, training distributors, or any other situation.

It has to be the right information; it has to be at the right time; and it has to come at the right pace.

Give somebody wrong information and it won't help them build their business. Give them the right information at the wrong time, and they won't listen or won't be able to utilize it. Give it to them at the wrong pace and they'll feel either overwhelmed or bored.

People learn differently. Some people are verbal; others learn through facts and figures, statistics and analysis. Some prefer to listen to audio programs, while others can't learn unless they're watching it. Consequently, one of the best things you can do is make sure you develop your training materials into different forms.

How can I tell people's preferences?

Too often we go hunting for prospects, when we could go fishing. I used to give this analogy in my minister days: When Jesus recruited his first disciples, he said, "Come and follow me, I'll make you fishers of men." I always found it fascinating that he didn't say, "I'll make you hunters of men!" In fact, I think the only times the church has been unsuccessful in their 2000-year history is when they were hunting when they should have been fishing.

When you fish, you have to find the right kind of bait; you have to find the right place, where the fish are biting; and you have to present the bait in a way that the fish will be interested. This is the whole beauty of fly fishing: you cast the fly and it taps the water, and taps, and taps, and then rests.

When you hunt an animal, it runs. When you're fishing, you prepare and present your tools appropriately, and the animal comes toward you.

When you say, "Go to where the fish are biting," that means...?

Don't spend a lot of time on people who aren't interested. Find the people who are hungry for your type of opportunity. Once you find the right people and determine that it's the right time, then you have to decide what kind of information would be beneficial for them.

And how do you determine this?

Just ask. "I've got an audio CD, a booklet, or a DVD—which would you be interested in?" People will say, "Oh, I'm in my car all the time, I'd love to listen to it." Or, "I'm on the plane a lot, I'm always looking for things to read, give me the booklet." Or they'll say, "I'd just as soon watch this at home—I'll take the DVD."

So from the word go, you're engaging in a dialogue to find out who this person is.

Right. It's all based on relationships. People buy from, learn from and follow people they have relationships with, people they like.

We all know what it's like to be approached by people who hunt you down. We can sense that they don't really want to know us, they just want us to sign up. And what happens? We're repelled—we run away.

I want to interact with people I'm attracted to, people who like me and care about me. And I know that if I decline, they'll still be my friends. Often in such situations, after some time has passed and you've become more successful, that person who was originally skeptical will come back and ask to hear about it again. Why? Because now it's the right time—and because you've maintained the relationship.

Because you're treating them as a person, not a number.

That's the key. Yes, in a sense it's "a numbers game"—but it's always about relationships.

When I was preparing to give a talk to a group at Cisco Systems, I called my brother-in-law, because he was a buyer for all things technological at one of the major retail chains in America. I asked him, "Hey, did you guys ever buy anything from Cisco?"

He said, "Absolutely, about \$20 million over the last three years!" In fact, he bought exclusively from them. I was curious why. Was it the product? The service? The presentation? The warranty?

He said, "It's none of those things—we just like their sales guy better." Here was a nationwide \$20 million buying decision based on the likeability factor of one guy!

What does leadership have to do with learning?

Sales and leadership both draw from the same fundamental core competency: the ability to influence people.

Your success in life is based on your ability to influence other people. As a baby, you have to influence mom or dad to feed you when you're hungry; you do this with a very raw influencing skill: screaming.

By the time you're eight and you want mom or dad to buy you a bike, you've honed your influencing skills a bit: you say, "Can I have a bike? Can I...?"—and pretty soon they knuckle under!

Now you're in high school and you want to take that girl to the prom: you have to influence her. To get into college, you influence an admissions panel. After college you influence a boss to hire you. Throughout life, our ability to succeed is based on our ability to become an influential person.

What are the ingredients of influence?

There are two primary factors: character and skill. In other words, most people are influenced by *who you are and by what you can do*.

I recently stumbled across a great quotation from Thomas Jefferson that expressed the exact same thing: "There is a natural aristocracy among men, the grounds of which are virtue and talent."

In Europe, aristocracy had been passed on from generation to generation—but in their new country, Jefferson was saying, successful people would rise to the top based not on ancestry

or inherited position but on these two intrinsic factors: “virtue,” who we are, what kind of person we are, and “talent,” what we can do and how well we can do it.

So, character and skill—do these two attract people in equal measure?

In my seminars, I ask people to give me a list of the top 50 attributes of great leaders or influencers. As they call them out, we write them on the board. Then we go through them one by one, asking, “Is this a character trait or a skill?” For example, “communication” would be a skill; “integrity” is character.

Here’s the fascinating thing: 80 to 95 percent of everything they come up with is character-based rather than skill-based.

That’s what people are really looking for in a leader. Yes, they want to know your skill level is high—but what they *really* want to know is, “Are you the kind of person I can trust and follow?” Character is what determines whether or not people will follow me, buy from me or sign up under me.

That’s why I think it’s so important to continually pursue self-education: to constantly hone our character and increase the level of skill at which we ply our trade.

People often equate education with learning skills—but you’re talking about continuing education influencing who I am, not just what I can do.

That’s how it *should* be. When I do this exercise, I’ll ask, “How many of you have ever been to a four-hour training focused on skills or product knowledge?” Almost all hands go up. Then I ask, “How many have ever been to a four-hour training on character improvement?” Very few hands go up, and when they do, it’s usually in relation to something they did through a church, temple or community group.

This is something we need to change. There is so little character training, training that challenges people to think about right and wrong, integrity, and other character issues.

And yet that’s exactly what people are looking for in their leaders.

Exactly. It’s a gaping hole in our educational system. We tend to teach basic sales skills, how to handle objections, how to handle a meeting, product knowledge, things like that. Those things are important. But that doesn’t impress anyone.

Very few people are going to buy a product because you explain the ingredients. They’re going to make their decision to buy or enroll based on what they think of you.

I often ask in interviews, “Are we in a leadership crisis? and I never get a “No.” But is that new? Or is it that as human beings, we’ve always been in a leadership crisis?

I happen to believe in the theological concept of original sin. I love the old quote from the Catholic theologian G.K. Chesterton, “The only philosophy empirically validated by 3500 years of human history is original sin.”

This is not something to be depressed about—it’s actually something to be excited about, because it means that what we really need are people of character, people who fight the urge to do wrong and instead discipline themselves to do right.

We all have the urge to cut corners, that's human nature. What separates the leaders is that they have the capacity to discipline themselves to do what's right, and then encourage others to do the same thing.

So, yes: I think we've always been in a leadership crisis. And you can also look back through history and see shining examples of people doing the right thing in a way that stood as empowering examples for others, people who rose to a higher standard and left their mark on the world. Those are the real highlights of human history. And there's no reason we can't be those people.

Prospecting for the Angel Inside

Chris's book The Angel Inside is based on the story of Michelangelo creating the statue of David. As the story goes, a little boy who watched as Michelangelo worked on the marble asked the master, "Why are you hitting that rock?" Michelangelo replied, "There's an angel inside and I'm setting him free." Chris believes this story offers a powerful model for network marketing leaders.

What's most interesting to me about the story of Michelangelo's David is that most artists thought this particular slab of marble was inferior—that it was too thin to work with, and the first time you put a chisel to it, it would crack in half.

Over the course of about 25 years, many artists were offered the opportunity to work with this piece of stone, including Leonardo da Vinci, but most declined to accept a formal commission. There were two well-known artists who did accept a commission—but after studying the slab for quite some time, both gave up the commission, saying, "I can't do anything with this."

They couldn't see what lay resonant in the rock—but Michelangelo could see what they couldn't, and in setting his chisel to that rock to carve out the David, he carved his name into human history.

I think this is such a powerful image. Every single one of us, no matter what we may look like on the surface, has inside us this capacity for power and beauty.

Those two other artists looked at the marble and said, "Nah, I don't see anything in there." How often do we do that with the people around us? Or even with ourselves?

It takes a person of great vision, like Michelangelo, to see the potential trapped within a piece of inert rock. I think that's an important model to remember when we go prospecting: every single person has the capacity for greatness within them—that angel inside. — C.W.

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