

The Three Traits Warren Buffett Looks for in an Employee

From time to time I speak to young professionals trying to make their mark on the world in politics, academia, or journalism.

The question I encounter the most is this: “What’s the best career advice you give to young people trying to make it.”

My answer often touches on the importance of perseverance, because it’s easy to get discouraged by setbacks and rejection. Landing your dream job isn’t easy when you don’t have a lot of work experience, and sometimes keeping it is even harder, at least if you approach your work with the wrong mindset. And many people seem vaguely aware of this.

A stunning percentage of Americans live in fear of being fired, data show, and this is particularly true for younger workers. According to [one recent Harris Poll](#), 61 percent of American workers between 18-34 suffer from anxiety over fear of losing their job, compared to 41 percent of workers over 35.

‘We Look for Integrity’

One of the keys to a long and successful career is having the skills and mindset employers desire. While different employers desire different qualities, the financial wizard Warren Buffet has offered one of the better insights on what employers often look for in workers.

“We look for three things when we hire people. We look for intelligence, we look for initiative or energy, and we look

for integrity,” the Sage of Omaha [has said](#). “And if they don’t have the latter, the first two will kill you, because if you’re going to get someone without integrity, you want them lazy and dumb.”

What Buffett is saying, essentially, is that intelligence and initiative are important, but *integrity* is what matters most. But what is integrity?

The word is defined as “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness.” This definition is helpful but it’s also a bit limited, and it doesn’t quite tell us what Buffett is getting at.

What Buffett is saying, I think, is that he wants employees he can trust to get things done.

In about 30 years of working jobs high and low, the one thing I’ve noticed above all else is there are people who know how to show up on time, meet deadlines, and complete the tasks they say they’ll complete, and there are people who know how to make excuses and avoid taking responsibility.

I once had a writer who begged to write a story. I gave him the assignment, and the first thing he did was say he couldn’t meet the deadline he had proposed. I don’t remember the excuse he gave, but I do remember telling myself I’d never use that writer again.

Leaning Into Responsibility

When Warren Buffett says he wants workers with integrity, I think he’s saying he wants workers he can trust to complete the tasks they say they’ll complete, and people who *take responsibility*.

This last part is key, because there will be times when we don’t get the job done; we come up short. When this happens, many people will be tempted to point fingers at people or

externalities that frustrated completion of the task.

This is the wrong approach.

A worker with integrity will look at the situation and instead of blaming others ask, *What could I have done differently? How could I have helped us achieve a better outcome?*

This might sound simple, but the reality is it's hard for humans to do this. We *want* to blame others. We *want* to find excuses. We *want* to pass the buck. It's a trait we see in the powerful and the weak; in our children and politicians; in our families, co-workers, and (yes) even ourselves.

"There is a logic to the desire to avoid punishment, and since so many people grow up in similar circumstances, the habit runs deep," Ryan Ferguson, co-host of The World Wanderers Podcast [has noted](#). "But as you make the transition from childhood to adulthood, it is a habit you have to learn to leave behind."

In her classic work [Atlas Shrugged](#), Ayn Rand uses the villain James Taggart to show how corrosive and ugly this tendency is. Taggart, the president of Taggart Transcontinental and older brother to heroine Dagny Taggart, can't take responsibility for anything. He can make no decisions, just excuses; and his indecision and weakness have paralyzed the company.

Dagny is a stark contrast. She is responsible for making sure the railroad operates, and assumes responsibility at every turn. Consider this exchange early in the novel, when Dagny tells her brother she intends to rebuild the struggling Rio Norte Line with new metal produced by industrialist Hank Rearden.

"The consensus of the best metallurgical authorities," [James Taggart] said, "seems to be highly skeptical about Rearden Metal, contending-"

"Drop it, Jim," [his sister replied].

"Well, whose opinion did you take?"

"I don't ask for opinions."

"What do you go by?"

"Judgment."

"Well, whose judgment did you take?"

"Mine."

"But whom did you consult about it?"

"Nobody."

"Then what on earth do you know about Rearden Metal?"

"That it's the greatest thing ever put on the market."

"Why?"

"Because it's tougher than steel, cheaper than steel and will outlast any hunk of metal in existence."

"But who says so?"

"Jim, I studied engineering in college. When I see things, I see them."

"What did you see?"

"Rearden's formula and the tests he showed me."

"Well, if it were any good, somebody would have used it, and nobody has."

He saw the flash of anger, and went on nervously: "How can you know it's good? How can you be sure? How can you decide?"

“Somebody decides such things, Jim. Who?”

James Taggart eventually gives way to his sister, but he makes it very clear *he* is not responsible for the decision.

“Are you taking the responsibility for it?”

“I am.”

“Go ahead,” he said, and added, “but at your own risk. I won’t cancel it, but I won’t commit myself as to what I’ll say to the Board.”

“Say anything you wish.”

How to Build Trust With Others

Now, I have no idea if Warren Buffett has read *Atlas Shrugged*. I’m not implying he did or that he’s a fan of her work or [Objectivism](#).

What I am saying is that an employee with integrity is one who accepts responsibility. She’s the employee you can rely on to get the job done when she says she’s going to, not the employee who’s already making excuses or passing the task on to someone else. This is a quality employers desire.


“Taking responsibility when things go wrong is crucially important to building trust with others and learning from your mistakes,” writes Ferguson. “It is one of the most important parts of creating a satisfying life, but a lot of people learn the opposite growing up.”

James Taggart is one of the people who learned the opposite lesson growing up.

My advice to young people? Approach life as a Dagny Taggart.

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