

## Core Character Traits for Family Medicine

At our recent AFMRD Board of Directors meeting we read the monograph The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle by James C. Hunter<sup>1</sup>. The chapter on character stimulated a discussion about the core character traits of effective family physicians. With rank lists on our minds we wondered how do we discern an applicant's character when all you have is the ERAS file and an interview encounter on which to make your rank decisions? In the scramble you have even less time to assess character using only the ERAS file and a phone interview. Yet, character is likely the core quality without which a resident may never master family medicine. As one Board member put it, "Character is the trump card. It doesn't matter what your USMLE scores are if you lack the character to be a family physician."

What are these core character traits and how do we discern them from an ERAS file and an interview? The Board worked on this and we present to the membership our insights, wisdom, and opinions. Others will have different opinions or additional insights and wisdom. The AFMRD Board members considered the following three questions.

1. What are the character traits that make a good family physician?
2. How do you judge character from an ERAS file?
3. How do you assess character during an interview?

### What are the character traits of good family physicians?

1. Excellent interpersonal skills, compassionate, good work ethic, enthusiasm to learn, maturity, honesty, and a sense of humor.
2. "Character traits for a good FP: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, reverent, actually that's what I memorized to be a good Boy Scout, but most of it applies to family medicine as well."
3. "There are two bottom-line principles of character that relate to work ethic: commitment to patients and commitment to colleagues. Representing the 'view from the trenches,' nothing is more infuriating to residents than colleagues who don't carry their weight. Whatever we can do to filter out weak/questionable commitment during the screening process is time well spent."
4. "Character is what you do when the lights are off and no one is looking."

### How do you judge character from ERAS and your computer?

1. Google them. You just never know what you may find.
2. “Verify their publications. Randomly spot check information on applications and use a process of confirmation either by a primary source, a secondary source or by discussing it in the interview.”
3. Look at personal statements that address how they may have overcome adversity, such as taking responsibility for challenges in their learning process.
4. Look for comments about character in the letters of recommendation that give specific examples.
5. Previous demonstration of service work. Have they waited tables, served as a nurse’s aide, worked in a nursing home?
6. How many different evaluators mention maturity in the ERAS file?
7. “I look for letters that indicate the writer really knows or was impressed by the applicant. Do they really mean the comment, “I wish this student was going into my specialty”?”
8. Don’t write off a poor USMLE record if everything else points to quality. Are poor scores accompanied by evidence of commitment to remediation?
9. What was the level of participation in service related activities? “I place more value on someone who held a leadership or management position than someone who just showed up. I’m also most impressed with someone who recognized a need in the community and actually founded a new program.”
10. Look for evidence of humility. Be wary of too many “I’s” in the personal statement. “Any hint of arrogance is a millstone on our rank list. We have enough here in Boston already without adding to it.”
11. “I am not looking for someone who puts in more hours – it may take them longer because they have problems getting the job done.”
12. Google them again right before you rank them.

### How do you assess character during an interview?

1. “Ask them to reflect on meaningful experiences in the application, ‘What did it mean to you to spend that month in Africa?’ Ask them to reflect on the most positive and most negative comments in the Dean’s letter. Students are not afraid of a challenging interview. They are often pleased when they skillfully maneuver a rigorous interview.”
2. Ask them their experience navigating adversity.

3. If they “failed” something, check and see if they are proactive and discuss it somewhere, how did they address it? Do they take responsibility for the failure or do they shift blame to their school, their roommate, and their circumstance . . . ?
4. Ask them about their service work. When they talk about it do they talk more about the activity and the people they worked with than themselves? Do they express enthusiasm for the people they worked with, the people they served? Is there evidence they are willing to work hard in an unglamorous role? Ask them why they chose specific volunteer activities in their file to see if they are passionate about it in some way.
5. What is the evidence of commitment to service? (volunteer activities, mission trips, indigent clinics, etc). Probe for the “relevance” of these activities during the interview. Are these just C.V. building activities or do they reflect this applicant’s character?
6. Are they loyal to their school, faculty, and fellow students? Did they work on the admissions committee for their school or give campus tours?
7. Ask them whom they admire most in history and why.
8. How effective are they at communicating? If I have trouble understanding them then our patients, nurses, and staff will also.

#### Observations and reflections from the Interview process

1. How did they treat the secretaries, and servers at the cafeteria?
2. Listen to the residents and coordinator about their interactions with the applicant, especially during the non-formal parts of the interview day.
3. Did they arrive early/late or leave early without a valid explanation?
4. Are they introverted? (In which case they may not show their best stuff with people they do not know) as compared to the extrovert that everyone quickly bonded with during the visit.
5. Do they fit into the personality of the program?
6. Do they seem to be teachable? Do they accept feedback, make changes, and improve?
7. Would you be comfortable seeing this doctor as a patient?

In closing, here are five one-liners all from James Hunter's monograph: <sup>1</sup>

- "Personality deals with style while character deals with substance."
- "Character is what we are beneath our personality"
- "Our character is our level of commitment to doing the right thing."
- "You can judge people's character by how they treat people who can do nothing for them."
- "Character is knowing the good, doing the good, and loving the good."

Best wishes to all in the Match and the scramble. We hope you find this useful.

The AFMRD Board  
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1. Hunter, JC: The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle: How to become a servant leader. Crown Business, New York, New York, 2004.