

Integrity in Business Leadership

By Frank Binnendyk

Abstract: Integrity is a foundational element of business leadership. The way we conduct ourselves with respect to our word is critical to how we show up as a leader. There are a few different ways to interpret the word integrity. Sir Thomas More described integrity as “The state or quality of being entire or complete; wholeness; entireness; unbroken state; as, the integrity of an empire or territory”. Another slant as found in Webster’s *Revised Unabridged Dictionary* is that integrity is a Moral soundness; honesty; freedom from corrupting influence or motive; -- used especially with reference to the fulfillment of contracts, the discharge of agencies, trusts, and the like; uprightness; rectitude. This article will focus on the aspect of integrity as it relates to living your word and will not delve into the moral aspects of integrity.

INTEGRITY:

- The state of being whole or entire.
- A sound, complete or unimpaired condition.
- Uncompromising adherence to one's principles; soundness of character; honesty.

Leadership and integrity are inextricably coupled. Without integrity, leadership theories and practices fall flat. Integrity is the glue that binds organizations together, the cornerstone of achieving success. My father had the honor and privilege of receiving an award from President Dwight D. Eisenhower who stated “The supreme quality for a leader is unquestionable integrity.”

Integrity really comes down to a yes or no question. You either have it or you don't. If you don't have it then it acts like a poison in an organization causing it to fragment and splinter in dissention. The higher you are in an organization the more devastating the impact when you are not acting in the space of integrity. Therefore, leaders must always display the highest levels of integrity.

Leaders with integrity are sincere, their actions match their words. A single act of integrity makes a good impression, but a leader's behavior must be consistent if they are to be successful in motivating people to their maximum performance in accomplishing their tasks and business goals.

How we live in integrity

- Say what you will do
- Do what you say
- Acknowledge and take responsibility for breakdowns (no excuses)

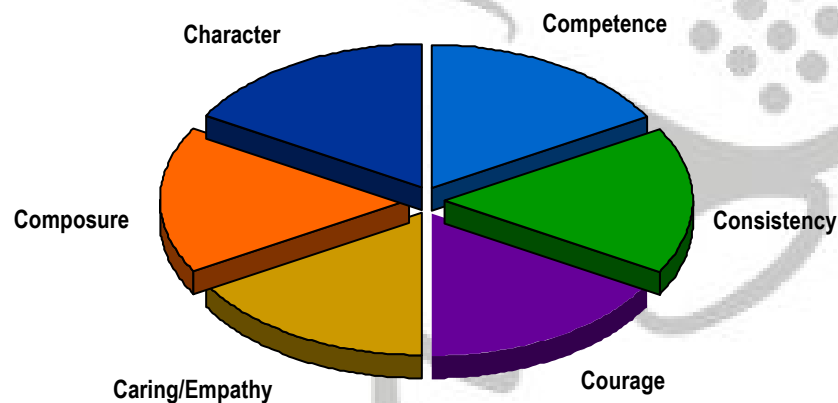
When integrity is compromised, and be honest we all find ourselves out of integrity from time to time, it reflects on our character and credibility. This has a direct impact on trust in a relationship, as character is one of six fundamental components of trust¹. Trust can be further simplified and expressed as a function of three variables²; credibility, empathy and risk.

$$\text{Trust} = f \frac{(\text{Credibility}) \times (\text{Empathy})}{(\text{Risk})}$$

To assess if we have a strong foundation for relationship, we can mentally answer three questions:

- Do I perceive that this person is credible? -or- Am I perceived as credible?
- Do I perceive that they understand and are sensitive to my feelings and thoughts without me having to explicitly state them? (Empathy) -or- Am I perceived as having empathy?
- To what extent do I perceive that I am at risk in this situation?

One of the three characteristics that constitute credibility is character and integrity is at the heart of character. When we are out of integrity, we compromise our ability to be trusted and compromised trust undermines our ability to effectively lead.



¹ Stewart Emery, Trust: What is it Exactly (http://www.leadlearnteach.com/index_files/Trust.htm)

² Trust formula developed by John Phillips, Synectics Corporation, Cambridge MA

It should be no surprise that we are being constantly evaluated and judged by those we lead. Once you assume a leadership position, you become a focus of conversation where those you lead are now judging and talking about you.

It is part of the human condition to ask judging questions in our own internal dialogue. After all, we as humans are meaning making machines. That meaning often shows up in the form of judging. Individual acts as small as showing up late for meetings will breach integrity and leave us open to negative judgment.

Each of us has an internal dialogue that we pay attention to. It is in this conversation that the judging first begins to surface. This internal dialogue is sometimes referred to as the “left-hand column”. The left-hand column results from the fact that during conversations there are actually two conversations taking place for each of us. One conversation is the explicit words that are actually spoken. The other conversation, the one we really pay attention to, consists of what we are thinking and feeling in that little voice in side our heads. What little voice you ask? Why it is the voice that just prompted that question. It is the voice that will remain active until the day we die. The term "left hand column" is derived from an exercise³ designed to explore what is not said, but thought about, during the course of a conversation. This "tool" offers a way to actually study our conversations so that we can re-design them to be more effective at creating the results that we wish to create.

When we are out of integrity it shows up in our words and actions. Those individuals we are interacting with often detect the lack of integrity and begin to build their left hand column. Be certain, if this particular internal back ground conversation were brought directly into the foreground it would not be flattering to you in the least.

We are accountable to each other to remain in integrity. So as we build a “left hand column” with respect to someone’s words and actions it can be productive to find a way to bring that background issue into the foreground. It is out of integrity for you to operate with someone who is noticeably out of their own integrity and not call them on it. Integrity is affected by not only what we do, but what we fail to do.

There are many ways we compromise our integrity ranging from something as simple as being late; to renegotiating promises without checking with all of the stake holders; to saying one thing and doing another (“mumble the stumble” vs. “walk the talk”)

So the big question at hand is how to live in integrity? How do we get back on the track when we inevitably compromise integrity? The answer is surprisingly simple in theory but challenging in practice. First, take a stand for living in

³ Senge, Peter, et.al. (1994), The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization. New York: Doubleday. P.246-252

integrity. This can take the form of a declarative statement. Then you can build a lifestyle of integrity one step at a time. Individual acts of integrity lead to a habit of integrity and sustained habits lead to a way of life. The most effective way to develop your integrity is to apply it to everything you do every day, no matter how small or inconsequential⁴.

Steps to get back on track

- Take responsibility for your words and actions
- Speak authentically, speak from the heart
- Repair the damage when integrity is compromised, make affected stakeholders whole
- Promise to not make the same breach in the future

There is a huge price for your lack of integrity that can only be paid for by one person and can only be changed by one person, you. The first step to declare yourself a person who lives in integrity, now and in the future. Then make a promise and keep it. Start with a small promise and keep it. Then make and keep another promise, and another, until it becomes your "norm". Apologize and forgive; and hold yourself accountable. It's that easy. Here are some other integrity-building suggestions:

- Don't lie. Lying is almost always associated with lack of integrity, even if the lying is "justified". Once one is labeled a liar, it is very difficult for you to be seen as having integrity. As Baltasar Gracian, the Spanish Jesuit philosopher and writer once said, "A single lie destroys a whole reputation of integrity".
- Don't exaggerate. Exaggeration is just another form of lying, although less malicious.
- Respond, don't react. Think before you speak or do. Act with emotional intelligence. When we act on emotion, we do not always act in accordance with our beliefs.
- Know your beliefs. Before you can act consistently with your beliefs, you must know what they are. Once you know them, declare them openly.
- Strive for long-term success. Do not be tempted by immediate gratification at the expense of long-term success. Always keep the big picture in your mind.

One way to get a measure of your own integrity is pay attention to what you think and how you act when no one can observe you. Integrity can also be the promises you make and keep for yourself.

⁴ General Ronald R. Fogleman, The Leadership-Integrity Link , (AU-24 Concepts for Air Force Leadership) pp 39-40 (<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/au-24/fogleman.pdf>)

The pay off of living in integrity is huge. Living in integrity enables living in self respect. Living in integrity is living in the power that is available to each and everyone of us. As you live your word you will become a leader people will follow with pride and you will be gaining the respect of your peers, superiors and subordinates.

President Abraham Lincoln once told a story about a farmer who had a tall, majestic-looking tree growing next to his house. One morning he saw a squirrel run up the side of the tree and disappear into a hole. Curious, the farmer looked into the hole and discovered that the tree he had always admired for its apparent grandeur was hollow inside and in danger of falling on his home during a strong storm⁵. Like the tree leaders who have the appearance of substance but lack internal integrity won't have the fortitude to make it through challenging times. Unlike the tree, you control your level of integrity and can repair it when damaged. Do you have the mettle?

⁵ Donald T. Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership* (New York: Warner Books, 1992) pp55-56.