

# **LeaderPerfect Newsletter**

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## **Integrity: "We Never Talked About That"**

by Dr. Mike Armour

As my long-term readers know, I often talk about values. Especially core values. And sometimes I wonder if I'm overdoing it. After all, it's easy to trivialize a subject by talking about it too much. When that happens, people are likely to quit paying attention.

But something happened two weeks ago that renewed my resolve to keep values on the front burner. Particularly integrity. This defining moment occurred near the end of my twelve-day trip to Russia. The purpose of the trip was to teach a weeklong seminar for 125 high school teachers. Most were specialists in history, literature, and social science. And the seminar focused on using the classroom to instill values.

### **That Won't Translate**

I had prepared a series of case studies that I planned to present on the fourth day of the seminar. That morning, while the teachers were still gathering, I began to review my plans for the day with my translator. When I mentioned the case studies, she asked how I would be using them.

"They are stories for teachers to use in their classrooms to foster a discussion of important values," I explained.

"Like what?" she asked.

"Well, take this one," I replied. "It's about the importance of integrity."

I intended to summarize the case study. But before I could go any further, she cut me off. "That won't translate into Russian," she said.

Not thinking I understood her, I pressed for clarification. "What won't translate?"

"The word 'integrity,'" she answered. "There's no word for it in Russian. At least not one that captures all the nuances you Americans have in mind when you use the word 'integrity.'"

Seeing the look of disbelief on my face, she began to elaborate. "There's an old-fashioned word that's generally equivalent to your concept of 'integrity,' but it's mostly a literary word. You find it in novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. But no one thinks of it as a relevant word for today's world. It only describes people who lived a long, long time ago."

"So what do you do when an American uses the word 'integrity'?" I asked.

"We usually translate it as 'honesty' or perhaps 'strength' or 'wholesomeness.' But we don't have a word that encompasses everything your word 'integrity' implies."

### **More Than Honesty**

Had she been less competent, I might have questioned her credibility. But she was raised in an English-speaking household (her mother was a professor of English literature). And she had studied in the U.S. while completing one of her two doctorates. There was no reason to doubt her word on the subject. But just on the outside chance that she was wrong, I opened the bound set of case studies to the one in question. And sure enough, where I had used the word "integrity," the translators had substituted "honesty."

Later, as I presented the case studies to the seminar, I recounted what my translator had told me. "While honesty is essential to integrity," I explained, "integrity involves much more than honesty alone." I then spent about ten minutes describing the qualities associated with integrity. When I finished, I asked the teachers to give me an equivalent for "integrity" from their own language. After several minutes of discussion, they finally concluded that there was none.

### **A Sobering Comment**

As this discussion was going on, my mind kept going back to something else my translator had told me that morning. "You must keep in mind," she said, "that during the socialist era we never talked about integrity."

What a sobering comment. "We never talked about integrity." For three generations, no one had even used the word, much less promoted the idea. Once I grasped the significance of what she had said, many of today's social, political, and economic struggles in Russia made far more sense to me. How do you build a democratic system with a capitalist economy in the absence of broad-based commitments to integrity?

Right then and there I decided that if I'm to err on the subject of core values, I will err on the side of talking about them too much rather than speaking of them too little. I had gone into the seminar intending to offer some case studies to those Russian teachers. Instead, they gave me a case study from their own history. They showed me how easy it is for critical values to lose a grip on our souls. All we have to do is to quit talking about them.

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