

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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A Case Study in Integrity: Would You Have Made This Choice?

by Dr. Mike Armour

In my book *Leadership and the Power of Trust*, I relate a story about a client who found himself in what some would call an enviable position.

He worked for a huge corporation which earned much of its revenue from government contracts, particularly defense contracts. He headed a team which built prototypes of weapons systems that were so advanced in their technology that they would not see the battlefield for ten to twenty years.

His "enviable moment" came as he boarded a flight in Washington, D.C. after a meeting at the Pentagon. Using some frequent flyer miles, he upgraded to first class, where he settled in for a three-hour flight.

On the row in front of him two men were carrying on a lively conversation about the company where they worked. From what they were saying, it was clear that one man was nearing retirement and that he was grooming the other man to replace him.

As the plane taxied to the runway, they continued to talk. Overhearing their comments, he quickly learned that that they worked for one of his company's primary competitors.

Opportunity Presents Itself

Once the plane reached cruising altitude, the older man pulled out a laptop and fired it up. He then said to his colleague, "Why don't we use the flight home to evaluate some of our options on this little project of ours."

From where he was seated, my client could see the computer screen clearly between the seats. There on display was a schematic drawing of their "project." Suddenly he realized that the older man was in fact his counterpart at the rival company. And their "project" was the prototype design which they were submitting to the Pentagon in direct competition with one of his designs.

What To Do?

I often relate this story in workshops on character and leadership, using it as a case study. At about this point in the story I pause and ask the participants what course of action he should have taken.

Needless to say, many comment on what a great stroke of luck had befallen him. Without moving from his seat he could collect a treasure trove of information about the competing prototype. This intelligence would be immensely valuable to his company. It might even secure him a major promotion.

And to be sure, my client thought through that very scenario. But he ranked certain principles above profit and career advantage. One of these principles was integrity. A retired Marine officer, his standards of integrity were quite high. And a deciding factor in choosing the company which he represented was their commitment to integrity.

The Decision

From the perspective of integrity he tried to determine what he should do, given the situation unfolding before him. As he evaluated his options, he asked himself, "What if the roles were reversed? What if I were the one talking and they were the one's listening? What would I want them to do?"

Once he put the question that way, he was soon clear on his course of action. He leaned forward, reached between the seats, and offered his business card to the man with the laptop. "Before you continue," he said, "you may want to know who is seated behind you."

The man looked at the card, then turned quickly toward my client. Shocked and speechless at first, the man finally blurted out a sincere expression of thanks, powered down his computer, and put it away.

Right Thing? Or Wrong Thing?

When I use this case study in my trainings, many participants argue that my client made a foolish choice. The conversation between the two men was open and unguarded, they point out. My client would not have violated his integrity by simply listening to what they had to say. What do you think? Do you agree?

Interestingly, my client's company thought that he made the right decision. When he shared this story with his management, they commended him for being so principled. Not a single person second-guessed him. Their response was a great testimony to the character of the company and confirmed for him that he had chosen the right company to work for.

My client's view — and his company's view — was that doing the right thing for others is always the right thing. And integrity, they believed, is compromised whenever we intentionally fail to do the right thing.

Further, in their commitment to integrity they were guided by a principle that integrity is never for sale. Not for money. Not for promotion. Not for competitive advantage.

No "For Sale" Sign on Integrity

Whether you side with my client's decision or with those who question it, the point is that he acted consistently with his concept of integrity. That's a calling we should all aspire to.

What passes as integrity today is often only a pale imitation of the real thing. This is one reason for our business and political worlds being rife with compromised integrity.

Yet no company would market itself as lacking in integrity. Nor would a politician ever campaign on a platform that integrity is irrelevant. Why, then, is integrity so often violated?

Usually it's because someone lost sight of the principle that integrity is not for sale. Staying true to this principle often demands great courage. And honoring it may cost us dearly or put us at a distinct disadvantage. Still, it's the right thing to do. The world was never made a better place because someone sold out on integrity.

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