

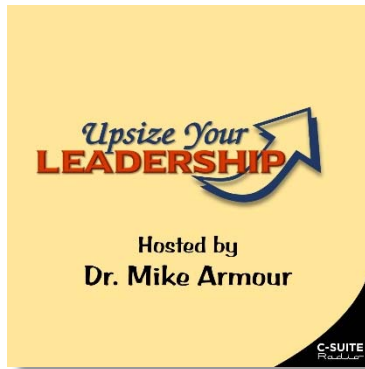
The Leadership Virtue Which No One Can Fake

Keeping Integrity in Good Repair

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Leaders are successful only to the degree that they can influence people to follow them. And there is no faster way for leaders to lose influence than to have their integrity called into question. This is why **personal integrity is a paramount leadership virtue.**

When leaders lose a reputation for integrity, they also lose the trust which people have placed in them personally and in their leadership. And people are hesitant to follow any leader whom they cannot trust.

In today's program we examine the interplay of integrity and trust in a leader's ability to exert influence. Leaders may not always succeed merely because they are trusted and have integrity. But they are certainly likely to fail if either of these qualities is missing.

And as we shall see, integrity is the one leadership virtue which you cannot fake. The cornerstone of true leadership is integrity which is genuine. Maintaining integrity of the highest order is critical if you are to Upsize Your Leadership.

It's all but impossible to discuss the qualities of trusted leadership without talking about integrity from the outset. In the absence of integrity, a leader's potential for building trust is sorely compromised.

"Integrity" is itself an intriguing word, given its numerous shades of meaning. Its root, of course, is the word "integer," which refers to a whole number. Anything with integrity has a singular essence. It's not part this, part something else. Integrity implies consistency throughout.

But integrity also carries the meaning of being sound, dependable. When an engineer speaks of a bridge or building as having integrity, we can be assured that the structure is in no danger of collapse.

Less commonly integrity carries the sense of adhering to a set of conventions or standards. An art work has integrity if it is consistent with the norms for that particular genre of art. In science, findings that ignore the scientific method are considered lacking in integrity.

Then, of course, there is the lead definition of integrity in the Oxford English Dictionary, which describes it as “the quality of being honest and morally upright.”

The common denominator in all of these concepts is a thorough-going consistency with some set of underlying standards.

- The integrity of a bridge or building is determined by how consistently the structure conforms with essential principles of physics and engineering.
- Artistic and scientific integrity entails consistency with established protocols.
- Moral and ethical integrity is consistency with a code of values.

Consistency and standards. These two factors are the bookends which frame integrity. And here, in this combination of consistency and standards, is the link which makes trust and integrity inseparable. Trust, as I commonly define it, is “complete confidence that a person or organization will consistently do what is right.” And to “consistently do what is right” is to practice integrity.

Moreover, **since consistency with standards is at the heart of integrity, it's the one leadership virtue which you can never fake.** Once a leader (or any person, for that matter) merely pretends to have integrity, the very act of pretense effectively obliterates integrity.

Not only that, but leaders impugn their integrity whenever they rely on pretense to build their reputation or public persona. While we cannot fake integrity, it is possible to fake other virtues of leadership. More than one leader, for instance, has convincingly faked empathy. Others have faked loyalty or fervor for a set of ideals or some other attribute of principled leadership. Whether they succeed in their deception or not, the fakery itself is a sacrifice of integrity.

The linkage between integrity and trust is particularly important in the realm of character. Trust coalesces around one of two things, either a person's character, the person's performance, or both.

Trust in a person's character is no assurance that we will also trust the person's ability to perform. We have all known wonderful, principled people, people with unassailable character, who rarely attained anything more than lackluster results. Their performance could not be trusted.

The reverse is equally true. We may trust performance, but not character. Some of history's most accomplished battlefield commanders were not men who were particularly virtuous. In the field of athletics, many a moral reprobate has been a dazzling sports performer.

Character and performance are the two primary domains of trust. And they both must be strong if trust is to be deep-seated.

Within these domains, integrity is our primary measure for determining strength of character. For that reason, integrity is a non-negotiable leadership trait. Warren Bennis, who studied more than 150 leaders over a decade and a half, determined that “character is the key to leadership.” Harvard University has since backed up his conclusion with research which found that 85% of a leader's performance is a product of personal character.”

If this is true, then even performance (the second domain of trust) is largely dependent on character, the first domain of trust. Performance demands technical competence, interpersonal skills, and organizational savvy, to be sure. But the linchpin to performance is character.

Interestingly, “performance” has a verb behind it. (My “performance” is the result of how I “perform.”) But there is no verb behind either integrity or character. We don’t speak of “doing” integrity or “doing” character. We can only speak of them as something which we possess. Something which we have. What we do (performance) flows from what we are (character).

Moreover, *character and integrity are so closely interwoven that when people lack integrity, we say that they “don’t have much character.”* Not having character suggests one of two possibilities. Either the person has improper standards. Or the person has appropriate standards, but fails to live up to them.

In either case there is an integrity issue. And in neither case are we likely to see this individual as trustworthy in the domain of character.

The beginning point for integrity, then, is to have appropriate standards. And let me emphasize the word “appropriate.” Upright people obviously have standards. They hold themselves accountable to these standards when determining how to deal with specific circumstances.

What’s often overlooked is that evil people may also have standards. Criminal organizations are known to ruthlessly enforce standards of behavior within their own ranks. Thus, the old adage which speaks of “honor among thieves.” Even tyrants like Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse Tung had standards. And like the crime boss, they lived by their standards.

Yet we would never refer to such men as people of character, no matter how closely their conduct conformed with their standards. They are not people of integrity because, their standards are entirely inappropriate.

Our standards arise from the interplay of three sets of ideas. First are our values. Second are our beliefs about these values. And third are the principles which we derive from this set of beliefs.

Appropriate standards, whether personal or corporate, meet the following litmus tests:

- To start with, appropriate standards are coherent. Collectively they fit together as a natural and cogent unit, with no contradictions among them.
 - This is to say, none of our values contradict other values which we hold. Nor do some of our beliefs contradict other parts of our belief system. And neither are there contradictions within our principles.
 - In addition, our beliefs do not contradict our values and our principles never contradict our beliefs. There is consistency in our values, beliefs, and principles.
- Next, appropriate standards are applicable across all contexts. That is, our standards are universal enough that there is no need to modify them from setting to setting. They are reliable guides, whatever the circumstance. This does not mean that we prioritize our values exactly the same in every context. After all, none of us is likely to prioritize values the same way in our family life that we do in our business life. But these shifts represent

merely a realignment of priorities, not the abandonment of one set of values, principles, and beliefs for another.

- Third, appropriate standards globalize to the betterment of all. In other words, overall human well-being would be well served if every person in the world chose to live by these standards. Some call this the “ecology test.” Appropriate standards, whether they are values, beliefs, or principles, should always lead to a triple win – a win for the person who holds the standards, a win for others with whom this person interacts, and a win for the overall well-being of our community, our planet and the human race.

Having clarity about our standards – about the values, beliefs, and principles which go into them – is of immense value to every individual, and especially for leaders. Have you ever taken the time to compile a list of your most cherished values? If not, I would encourage you to take time soon for that exercise.

Don't rush the process. And don't do it in a distracting environment. Undertake the exercise in a setting which allows you deep, reflective thought.

Once you've identified these cherished values, write out the primary beliefs which you have about each one. And then for each belief, list the key principles which you derive from it.

Now apply the ecology test to these principles. That is, ask yourself, “Would the world genuinely be a better place if every person on the planet lived each moment by these beliefs and the principles which I take from them?”

This exercise is one of the simplest ways to gain fresh clarity on the standards which shape your life. With that clarity, you arm yourself with an ever-ready frame of reference for making difficult decisions. If your frame of reference meets the criteria for appropriate standards which we outlined earlier, then decisions which are true to that frame of reference will be decisions consistent with integrity.

Let me conclude with a story about integrity. And this story touches on one of the most sobering moments of my life.

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I began working closely with regional ministries of education across Russia. I was helping them address a problem which had arisen as the result of communism's fall.

For centuries, teachers in Russia have viewed their foremost responsibility as instilling character in the lives of students. For decades, these men and women could only teach virtues and values which were considered orthodox by Marxist authorities. Now, with Marxism brushed aside, they wanted to expand their curriculum to include more of the Judaeo-Christian worldview which had prevailed in Russia prior to the Bolshevik Revolution.

Several ministers of education in Russia asked me to teach weeklong seminars for their teachers. The goal was to give these men and women a deeper grasp of character as it has been understood historically in Judaeo-Christian cultures. Naturally, one of the concepts in my core curriculum was integrity.

For several of these early workshops, my translator was a woman with impeccable English skills. In addition to her doctorate from a Russian University, she had obtained a PhD in the U.S. and had returned to her hometown university to be a professor.

As we were setting up for the third day of class, she asked what topics I planned to address. When I mentioned integrity, she immediately said, "That won't translate." I responded, "What do you mean it won't translate?" She replied, "Russian doesn't have a word which conveys what you Americans have in mind when you talk about integrity."

Then she added, "In the 19th century certain Russian writers used a term which generally equates with integrity. But that word became archaic generations ago. You would never refer to someone today with such an old-fashioned word."

Now, I should add, that she and three generations of her family had become close friends of mine, and we were not above playing pranks on one another. So, thinking that her words might just be a practical joke, I came up with a strategy to see if what she said was true.

Later that morning, when I introduced the discussion of integrity, I initially avoided the word itself. Instead, I told the teachers to listen to a set of concepts, then tell me what one word in their language best captured the essence of all of these concepts.

There were about 100 secondary teachers in the class, many of them with graduate degrees. They were exceptionally well-read and had tremendous vocabularies. I spent about five minutes describing various aspects of integrity. Then I said, "Put your heads together in small groups and come up with a Russian term which conveys all of these concepts."

Buzz sessions immediately began in earnest and went on for several minutes. Finally, one of the opinion leaders in the class spoke up and said, "We don't have a word for it," at which point a hundred heads nodded in agreement. I glanced over at my translator, who by now was smiling ear to ear. "I told you," she beamed triumphantly.

Then she added a haunting statement. "You see," she continued, "for seventy years we never spoke of such things." In other words, corruption and dishonesty had been so pervasive under Marxist rule that people saw no point in talking about integrity. As a consequence, not just the concept of integrity, but the very terminology for it had vanished from the language.

Some time later, I was having dinner with her son, a brilliant young man in his twenties. In the course of our meal I happened to mention my interaction with his mother about integrity. "Oh, *that* word," he replied, rolling his eyes. "When I was studying in the U.S., it took me at least a year, maybe longer, to figure out what you Americans mean by 'integrity.'"

In the years which followed, I traveled far and wide in the Russian-speaking world. Everywhere I went, corruption was rampant. Ethical conduct struggled to find a footing. Communism had left behind a moral void which now permeated the culture. But then, what would you expect in a world where even the word for integrity has disappeared?

I've experienced firsthand, therefore, what can transpire in a society when we lose focus on integrity and all that it stands for. That's why I speak with genuine conviction, when I say that we must never relent in our pursuit of integrity.

As leaders, we must make a personal and steadfast commitment to integrity, a commitment to model it ourselves and to instill it as a core principle in the organizations we lead. And these efforts at promoting integrity need to be genuine. Authentic. Sincere. There is simply too much at stake for us ever to fake our commitment to integrity.

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