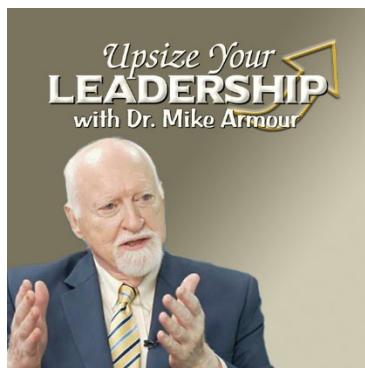


A Deep Dive Into Integrity

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In my work as an executive leadership coach and business consultant, I read no small number of corporate mission statements. They are frequently accompanied by a compilation of the company's core values.

Almost without exception, one of the values in that list is integrity. In fact, it's listed in the core values for my own company. In a world of scams and shams, the buying public is understandably cautious about where they choose to do business. To offset that caution, companies feel a necessity to underscore their integrity.

But what does it mean, exactly, to say that a person or a company has integrity? When I put that question to participants in my leadership and management training classes, the most common responses that I receive seem to equate integrity with honesty and telling the truth.

And I have no quarrel with the answer – as far as it goes. It just doesn't go nearly far enough. In today's program, I'm taking us on a probing journey into the full meaning of integrity. My hope is to both broaden and deepen your sense of what this vital word means. And in the process, I hope to strengthen your resolve to be an exemplar of integrity in your circle of influence. Join me for the next 15 minutes. It's sure to upsize your leadership.

One of my friends has been known to say, "If you can fake integrity, you can fake anything." I chuckle at his remark because modifying the word "integrity" with the word "fake" is a rather non-sensical idea, isn't it?

In fact, "integrity" is in a small, unique set of words in the English language for which there is no opposite. Have you ever noticed that? We have no means of describing someone as lacking in integrity other than merely saying that they don't have it.

Someone might argue that "dishonesty" or "deception" are opposites of integrity. And those words do point to a type of behavior which is inconsistent with integrity. But honesty and truthfulness are only two components in what constitutes integrity – important components, to be sure, but not an all-encompassing equivalent of integrity itself. Therefore, "dishonesty" and "deception" point to the absence of complete integrity, but they are not opposites of it.

And while we are talking about terminology, the word “integrity” has something of a symbiotic relationship with the word “character.” The two terms are all but synonymous in popular speech. If I say that someone has no character, people will generally understand me as having said that the person lacks integrity. Or to put it another way, we can’t imagine a person of character who does not practice a high degree of integrity.

Fully equating integrity and character, however, does a disservice to both concepts. Integrity is one element of great character – the most critical element, some would argue. But within character, integrity coexists with other admirable attributes such as responsibility, accountability, and self-control. A person who is irresponsible or makes a mockery of self-control would be seen as deficient in character, just as much as the person who lacks integrity.

Therefore, as we discuss integrity today, I want us to keep the distinctions between integrity and character in mind. They share many critical attributes. But they are not identical. At the same time, in this program I want to draw on the fact that in day-to-day speech, one’s level of integrity is the primary way that most people judge a person’s character.

The word “character” comes from an ancient Greek term which is spelled almost identically. For the Greeks, however, their word *charakter* had nothing to do initially with personality or personal attributes. It was the name for the tool – the die cast, if you would – used to stamp images on coins. *Like those images, we can think of our character as somewhat stamped on us.*

But there is a vital difference between images stamped on a coin and our own character. Images on coins will never be more brilliant than they were on the day that they were minted. As the coin passes from hand to hand, the constant rubbing of the image will eventually cause it to fade and grow faint.

By contrast, our personal character has the potential to grow continually more robust with the passage of time. And nothing contributes more significantly to robust character than thorough-going integrity.

From their study of 26,000 leaders, John Zenger and Joseph Folkmann concluded that “personal character is the core of all leadership effectiveness.”

Having followed the careers of 150 successful leaders over a 15-year period, Warren Bennis found that “character is the key to leadership.”

One body of research at Harvard University indicated that 85% of a leader’s performance is directly attributable to personal character.

And experts such as these would also tell us that the primary measure for determining strength of character is integrity.

There are two primary components in integrity, wherever we find it:

- First is having appropriate *behavioral standards*
- And second is acting *consistently with those standards*

The word “integrity” is derived from the word “integer,” which is a whole number, in contrast to a fraction or a number with a decimal portion. Thus, the fundamental idea of integrity is to be complete and singular, not partly one thing and partly another.

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 which 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 organized around some underlying standard. Integrity, in its most fundamental sense, connotes a consistent essence.

- The integrity of a bridge or building implies that the structure’s support system is consistent with design specifications and sound engineering principles.
- Artistic and scientific integrity entails consistency with established protocols.
- Moral and ethical integrity exemplify consistency with a code of values.

Consistency and standards. These two factors serve as the bookends that support integrity. And here, in this combination of consistency and standards, is the link which also makes trust and integrity inseparable. In my book *Leadership and the Power of Trust*, I define trust as “complete confidence that a person or organization will consistently do what is right.” And to “consistently do what is right” is to practice integrity.

Thus, common violations of integrity include actions which are incongruent or inconsistent with some spoken or unspoken standard, such as

- pretending to believe something that you don’t really believe
- practicing double standards in dealing with people
- saying one thing about people behind their back, but saying something different when talking to them face-to-face
- holding to inconsistent values from one situation to another
- failing to “walk the talk,” as we say – that is
 - advocating one set of values, but practicing a different set
 - promising to do something, but then doing something else
 - ignoring agreed-to rules of engagement within your organization

Character and integrity only manifest themselves in choices and behavior. Great character always includes good intentions, as does integrity, also. But merely having good intentions is neither a measure of character nor a demonstration of integrity. Good intentions, by themselves, reflect nothing more than a set of values and attitudes which we find attractive. *Only when good intentions are embodied in our choices and actual behavior do they constitute character or substantiate our integrity.*

Similarly, character and integrity always rest on a set of values and ethical standards. But again, simply believing in certain values or ethical standards does not constitute either character or integrity. Until values and standards are expressed in observable behavior, they are nothing more than concepts which appeal to us.

One of the serious disconnects in interpersonal relationships is how we view our integrity as opposed to the way that others view it. Others are most likely to make judgments about our integrity by drawing conclusions from what they see us do or hear us say. We, on the other hand, are prone to judge our integrity on our intentions. When we do something which violates our integrity standards, we are very creative at finding ways to rationalize our behavior to ourselves or to others, or to dismiss our misconduct entirely.

That's one reason why so many businesses which list integrity as a core value can sometimes violate their integrity code wholesale, but learn nothing from it. They are judging themselves on the nobility of their intentions, not on the reality of their actions.

And we face a temptation to do likewise ourselves as individuals. For this reason, I've found that people who genuinely embody integrity are normally very humble people. When they violate their code of integrity, they can face the fact honestly, acknowledge their inconsistency, and make a genuine resolve to avoid that mistake in the future.

In the absence of humility, the tendency of human nature is to become defensive when we act inconsistently with what we espouse as our standards and what we expect from others. And so long as we are in a defensive posture, we learn nothing from the way in which we have compromised our standards. As a result, we continue to think of ourselves as people of complete integrity, when our actions indicate that our integrity is marred by some blemishes.

Your credibility – and hence your influence – will never be greater than your reputation as a person of integrity. In building and sustaining a reputation, perception is everything. We've all known people who were artful enough at faking integrity that they had a reputation for being a person of genuine character. What a shock it is to everyone when that mask is ripped off due to some untoward moment that reveals the real person underneath.

The problem is, the truth of who we are is always lurking just below the surface, always ready at some unguarded moment to pop to the fore and reveal our hypocrisy. That moment of revelation can have devastating consequences. A reputation for integrity, once lost, is devilishly hard to regain. Sometimes, the task proves impossible.

The course of wisdom is thus to be clear-headed about what we believe it means to be a person of integrity, then conform our lives and our behavior to that standard. But I say that with one huge proviso. While consistency with the standards of integrity is our ultimate goal, we first must assure that the standards to which we adhere are legitimate standards of integrity. Let me close, therefore, by iterating a series of conditions which standards meet to qualify as indicators of integrity.

First, they are coherent. Integrity standards come from the interplay of our values, the beliefs which we hold about these values, and the principles which we derive from these beliefs. I talked about the relationship of values, beliefs, and principles in a podcast earlier this summer. The podcast was entitled, "The Molecule that Runs Your Life." If you missed that episode, you might listen to it in our podcast archive at UpsizeYourLeadership.com/episodes.

To qualify as standards of integrity, our values, beliefs, and principles should be properly prioritized. And they should fit together as a unit in a way that is natural and unforced. That is, there should be no contradiction between any of our values. Nor should any of our beliefs and principles violate any of our values or other beliefs and principles. In a word, our values, beliefs, and principles form a coherent whole.

Second, integrity standards should appeal to our higher nature. In addition to elevating our conduct, our integrity standards should also elevate our soul, our spirit, and our aspirations. Personal standards should draw us toward a noble outlook on life. Not all standards do.

For example, the standards of tyrants and dictators align with the baser elements of human nature, not the nobler instincts of the human heart. Therefore, even when tyrants are true to their standards, they are hardly people of integrity, for their standards for behavior do not qualify as integrity standards.

Third, legitimate integrity standards are applicable across all contexts. The standards which govern our integrity should be universally the right thing to do, so that there is no need to modify them from setting to setting. They are reliable guides, whatever our circumstances.

This does not mean that we prioritize our values and principles exactly the same in every context. None of us is likely to prioritize our values and principles the same way in our family life that we do in our business or professional life. But such shifts from one context to another represent only a realignment of priorities, not the abandonment of one set of values, beliefs, and principles for another.

Fourth, integrity standards globalize to the betterment of all. Appropriate integrity standards are never detrimental to ourselves or to others, wherever these standards are applied. In other words, if every person in the world were to live by these same standards, overall human well-being would be fully-served. Appropriate standards, whether they are values, principles, or beliefs, should always lead to a triple win.

- a win for the person who holds to the standard
- a win for anyone with whom this person interacts
- a win for the overall well-being of our planet and the entire human race.

And one final consideration. While character and integrity are framed by appropriate standards, standards translate into behavior (and thus integrity) only through an act of the will. And when acting with integrity entails risk, we also need courage. In effect, character and integrity are only as strong as our will and our courage.

The risks which test your integrity take many forms. Some involve the danger of losing your job, your position, your social status, or even your life. Others risk social embarrassment, rejection by others, humiliation, punishment, seeming like an “odd ball,” or disappointing someone whose admiration you cherish. To face down these risks and act in accordance with integrity, courage is necessary.

Ironically, both will and courage are themselves part of our character. Thus, to develop stellar character, no priority is greater than developing strength of will and courage. Otherwise, we may not have the inner resources we need to hold to our standards, no matter what.

Indeed, one can argue that for leaders the most important virtue is courage. You may remember that I talked about that very topic in my podcast just last week in a program entitled, “Without This, You Cannot Lead.” Without courage, leaders are too easily manipulated by fear, intimidation, and threats. But what is true of leaders is no less true of any of us in our personal lives. Leaders, because of their position, are usually thrust into circumstances which evoke fear or anxiety more often than people in less demanding roles. But we all are vulnerable to the threat of manipulation. Thus, while courage is more nearly an aspect of character than of integrity, without it integrity may struggle to prevail.

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