Executive Insights on Leader Integrity: The Credibility Challenge

Tony L. Simons  
*Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, tls11@cornell.edu*

Kurt Schnaubelt  
*Alix Partners, kschnaubelt@alixpartners.com*

John Longstreet  
*Pennsylvania Restaurant and Lodging Association, jlongstreet@hlgadvisors.com*

Michele Sarkisian  
*P3 Advisors, michele.sarkisian@p3advisors.biz*

Heather Allen  
*WOW Factor, heather@thewowfactorltd.com*

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/chrreports](http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/chrreports)

Part of the [Hospitality Administration and Management Commons](http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/chrreports) and the [Leadership Studies Commons](http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/chrreports)

**Recommended Citation**

Executive Insights on Leader Integrity: The Credibility Challenge

Abstract
Both anecdotal and empirical evidence points to the clear connection between leaders’ integrity and organizational success. However, numerous studies that address integrity demonstrate the confusion surrounding the many facets of that concept. Palanski and Yammarino, for instance, surveyed considerable literature and concluded: “Everyone seems to want integrity from their leaders, but … there appears to be great confusion about what it is or how to foster it.”1 They point out that progress in understanding how to promote leader integrity has been hindered by “too many definitions, too little theory, and too few rigorous studies.”2 They illustrate no fewer than ten distinct meanings that have been ascribed to the word “integrity,” and then propose a solution to best advance our practical and theoretical understanding of this important leader characteristic. They suggest that we consider integrity as alignment between words and actions—that is, promise-keeping and enactment of espoused values. This notion of integrity is one of an “adjunctive virtue,” one that, like courage, is not inherently morally good or bad. To take a negative example, one can show integrity by promising great harm and then delivering on that promise. However, like courage, integrity is necessary for the achievement of “moral uprightness,” which is why we usually think of these two attributes in a positive way.

Keywords
leadership, integrity, role models, accountability

Disciplines
Hospitality Administration and Management | Leadership Studies

Comments
Required Publisher Statement
© Cornell University. This report may not be reproduced or distributed without the express permission of the publisher.

Authors
Tony L. Simons, Kurt Schnaubelt, John Longstreet, Michele Sarkisian, Heather Allen, and Charles Feltman
Executive Insights on Leader Integrity:
The Credibility Challenge

by Tony Simons, with Kurt Schnaubelt, John Longstreet, Michele Sarkisian, Heather Allen, and Charles Feltman

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The importance of leader integrity cannot be overstated, given the clear benefits of integrity for a company and its employees. It can be challenging for a leader to be viewed as having high integrity, however, in part because observers differ in their definitions and understandings of integrity. In this report, five hospitality industry leaders explain experiences of leader integrity that help us better understand this critical leadership attribute. At root, integrity means that organization members can always count on a leader to enunciate planned actions and then fulfill those promises. Taking this another step farther, however, integrity stretches throughout the organization in the form of demonstrated leadership trust in all participants. Other elements include appropriate sharing of information throughout the organization and clearly setting an example for all participants. The report includes observations by Kurt Schnaubelt of Alix Partners, John Longstreet of Hospitality Leaders Group, Michele Sarkisian of P3 Advisors, Heather Allen of the WOW Factor, and Charles Feltman of Insight Coaching.
Both anecdotal and empirical evidence points to the clear connection between leaders’ integrity and organizational success. However, numerous studies that address integrity demonstrate the confusion surrounding the many facets of that concept. Palanski and Yammarino, for instance, surveyed considerable literature and concluded: “Everyone seems to want integrity from their leaders, but…there appears to be great confusion about what it is or how to foster it.”¹ They point out that progress in understanding how to promote leader integrity has been hindered by “too many definitions, too little theory, and too few rigorous studies.”² They illustrate no fewer than ten distinct meanings that have been ascribed to the word “integrity,” and then propose a solution to best advance our practical and theoretical understanding of this important leader characteristic. They suggest that we consider integrity as alignment between words and actions—that is, promise-keeping and enactment of espoused values. This notion of integrity is one of an “adjunctive virtue,” one that, like courage, is not inherently morally good or bad. To take a negative example, one can show integrity by promising great harm and then delivering on that promise. However, like courage, integrity is necessary for the achievement of “moral uprightness,” which is why we usually think of these two attributes in a positive way.

² Ibid.

Executive Insights on Leader Integrity:

The Credibility Challenge

by Tony Simons, with Kurt Schnaubelt, John Longstreet, Michele Sarkisian, Heather Allen, and Charles Feltman
Leader behavioral integrity has been linked to employee satisfaction, commitment, engagement, and fairness perceptions.

As Palanski and Yammarino note, their definition is similar to one I proposed in a 2002 paper to describe the concept of “behavioral integrity.” The key difference is that I posited that actual alignment or follow-through is critically important, and further that this alignment must be perceived by others if it is to influence a manager’s interpersonal and leadership effectiveness. This difference means that the leader’s integrity challenge is not only to live by one’s word, which is clearly hard work, but also to communicate effectively enough that others see him or her in that way, which makes the leadership task harder still.

This paper seeks to illuminate the dimensions of integrity through anecdotes and observations of five business leaders. As a starting point for the discussion, I shared with them copies of my book, The Integrity Dividend, which outlines the value of integrity and begins to point to the key elements of integrity. The behavioral integrity concept has given rise to dozens of studies which I have reviewed and analyzed that have been able to integrate and synthesize the notion of perceived leader word-action alignment into a web of attitudinal and performance outcomes, personal and situational drivers, and contextual factors that say when this alignment is more important and when less so.

Outcomes. Leader behavioral integrity has been linked to employee satisfaction, commitment, engagement, and fairness perceptions, while the lack of integrity is linked to follower cynicism, burnout, and stress levels. Several studies have also found that leader behavioral integrity improves follower performance, both in fulfilling workers’ duties (task performance) and in going the extra mile to assist the company and coworkers (organizational citizenship behavior). Leader behavioral integrity has also been shown to affect how employees respond to leader requests and to leader efforts to shape the ethical climate. Coaching and ethical initiatives are successful when behavioral integrity is high and high-back when it is low. Integrity also affects how workers respond to too much work, termed “role overload.” They innovate when integrity is high and cheat when it is low. In short, it appears that many leader behaviors are interpreted by followers in light of behavioral integrity perceptions.

Drivers. The key aspects of high or low behavioral integrity have received far less attention. The personality dimension of conscientiousness, or diligence in keeping track of and completing assignments, seems to be one driver. An interesting paradox emerges in that behavioral integrity appears to be driven by both “authenticity,” or personal adherence to internal values, and “political skill,” the ability to anticipate and manage others’ perceptions. In my book, I detail several practices, skills, and habits that should enhance behavioral integrity—such as the keeping of detailed to-do lists—but these have not yet been subjected to empirical testing.

Contextual factors. Another aspect of behavioral integrity that has been only slightly developed is the issue of context, which involves two related issues: (1) what situations tend to make behavioral integrity especially challenging, and (2) what situations make behavioral integrity more important, or less important?

With regard to the first question, there is some empirical evidence that managers emulate the level of integrity they see in their higher-ups within the organization. A situational challenge that has been discussed but not yet quantified in the integrity tension that can emerge for middle management when they are asked to implement and sell policies with which they do not agree. Similarly, in my 2002 paper I asserted that organizational change, by virtue of organization members’ increased uncertainty, confusion, and ambivalence, puts manager behavioral integrity at risk.9

Regarding situations contributing to integrity, several studies show that while behavioral integrity appears to have impact across different global cultures, subordinates in high-power-distance cultures seem to be more willing to attribute a boss’s broken promises to outside factors, which might mean that behavioral integrity is a somewhat less important leadership element in cultures that accord greater deference to authority.10

In sum, the science has solidly determined that people seek behavioral integrity in their leaders and that they respond to that integrity with positive attitudes and performance. That is a good start for a relatively new field of study. The next areas to be more fully developed, and therefore better understood, include the following:

- What leader initiatives require behavioral integrity in order to work?
- What personal attributes drive behavioral integrity so we can hire leaders who have more of it?
- What skills and habits enhance behavioral integrity so we can help existing managers to build it?
- What contexts put behavioral integrity at risk, and
- What contexts put premium on behavioral integrity, and what contexts render it relatively unimportant?

The five essays that follow begin to address some of these questions. These top consultants’ comments offer practical insights and several ideas for future research. As mentioned above, we used my 2008 book on the integrity dividend as a starting point for the discussion.

The Nitty Gritty of Integrity

Kurt Schnaubelt

Reading through Tony’s book was a bit like a walk down memory lane. I have experienced many of the ups and downs Tony and his contributors mentioned. In fact, I found myself looking critically at my career with that familiar feeling of growth—learning from mistakes and getting better, which is both painful and necessary.

The Young and Restless...But Organized: The Day-Timer Story

Following through on your promises is often not the hard part of integrity. Sometimes, the hardest part is to remember which promises you made in the first place. Fresh out of college, I was obsessive about keeping track of what I needed to do, an obsession which led me to use a Day-Timer Planner calendar religiously. I was glad I did because it paid off handsomely. Early in my career I was hired by the New England Child’s franchise group as a restaurant manager. This was a dynamic and exciting time with an excellent group of new managers and executive teams looking for jobs and had run out of “give a damn.” Of course, the cooks, servers, and bartenders were simply going through the motions. There was no energy in the building, sales were flat (in a strong economy during the heyday of casual dining), food waste was eye-popping, and management staff was the norm. That Chili’s restaurant needed a turnaround badly. It was nothing like the buttoned-up, tight-ship training restaurant I had just left.

One day, I was doing a line check during the afternoon shift, throwing away product that was over shelf life and teaching our cooks about food quality expectations when a server approached me regarding a scheduling issue. She told me that she requested a specific day off well in advance for her brother’s military deployment homecoming. However, she was scheduled to work on that day for some reason. With tears in her eyes she asked me if I could follow up and work around the schedule so she could take that day off. I pulled out my Day-Timer and dutifully jotted a note to follow up. I don’t remember how we got her shift covered, but she was at the airport to greet her brother for a tear-filled reunion.

Several months later, another team member asked me to check on something for him. I pulled out my Day-Timer and made a note, as usual. The team member laughed while walking away and said, “If we see it written down in that little book, it’s as good as done.” My habit of being detailed and following up for my team gave them confidence that I would be true to my word. In return, they were true to me and the other new managers who joined that Chili’s. One year later, we achieved the highest comparable sales growth, we were in the top three restaurants in the company for revenue and restaurant EBITDA, and we won the “Restaurant of the Year” award for the company.

The credit for that turnaround goes to many people. It was a team effort to get those results, but integrity and trust among the managers and between the managers and the hourly team was the foundation. That trust and integrity allowed us to be free of worry and suspicion so we could focus on all the right things: taking care of the guest, doing our jobs well, having a safe environment, and having fun. And those things created profit.

Sometimes, the hardest part of integrity is remembering which promises you made in the first place.
“death spiral” is one of the main things executives and turnaround professionals must remedy.

Make Your “Yes” Mean “Yes” and Your “No” Mean “No”

For a turnaround specialist often working in bankruptcy, integrity is critical. In many cases, the employers have been watching profits fall, capital spending cut to preserve cash flow, reductions in force (often many), and management trying to maintain confidence while secretly doubting whether there is anything left in which to be confident. This negative environment creates a downward spiral of distrust, suspicion, inefficiency, and fear. Breaking the “death spiral” is one of the main things executives and turnaround professionals must remedy if business improvement has any chance to gain traction and begin the virtuous cycle anew.

The Lord of Broken Promises

In fall 2001, the U.S. fell into a major recession. Many will recall how credit markets froze and the world economy sat on the precipice of disaster. Over the next year, many companies faced liquidity crises and were forced into bankruptcy. At that time, I began providing financial advisory services to distressed companies, many of which would be restructured in Chapter 11.

One of the most memorable moments occurred during the confirmation hearing of a large media company that we will call “Acme.” The confirmation hearing is where the final arguments turnaround professionals must make to ensure the company will survive. That day, the courtroom was packed with attorneys, creditors, executives, advisors, reporters, and ex-employees who would be watching to see what would become of Acme.

At the start of the hearing, Acme may have been the place where past promises were dashed away and new promises made, but for a turnaround and restructuring advisor, keeping your word is critical. Importantly, one needs to understand when a promise is made or implied. For example, our team had successfully navigated a middle-market, distressed, reorganization and kept the company going. The bankruptcy may be the place where past promises are conveyed to a sales person that we would try to devise a more equitable commission plan, given the shift in market demand over the past several years. The VP of sales told me that “try” or “attempt” are caveats that hold no weight, but if the CFO says something, it becomes expected. The details and resolution of that event are not the point (of course, we worked hard on the compensation matter and the numbers were not material), but what is pertinent to the integrity consideration is the expectation of the team member. Importantly, executives must measure their words carefully and the higher one’s position, the more care must be given.

Are You Serious?!?!?

In recent years, I have become increasingly fascinated with the language used by business people. Listening skills are not taught, and unfortunately, are not natural for most of us. I have struggled here and there to improve on listening skills by focusing on what the other person is saying without thinking what to say next. But the effort is paying off, and my ability to be a good, active listener is improving.

One of the most interesting outcomes of that effort is my sensitivity to key words and phrases. For example, I hear executives say something like, “let’s get together soon.” Most of the time, that’s unlikely to happen but it sounds like a nice thing to say. Recently I was on the verge of saying something similar when Tony Kline, Bristol’s CEO (or when I was with ClubCorp USA or as CEO of Quaker Steak & Lube), I confronted him about role modeling as the most powerful leadership tool, just like I believe it is in effective parenting. This is precisely what Kline is describing.

Having worked for another hotel company, I heard stories from the hotel general managers about preparing for visits from certain company execs and the special items that they would have to hand on to have satisfying the execs’ personal requests. In many cases thousands of dollars, if not tens of thousands, were spent to prepare for the visit. Contrast that with Kline’s visit to a Bristol hotel when he was CEO. In one example, he was checked into one of the hotel’s finest suites, complete with an elaborate welcome basket. He took the basket to the front desk and told the desk clerk in a nice way that, while he appreciated the suite, he would like to have a standard room and asked the clerk to either sell the suite to a paying guest or reward a regular hotel guest with an upgrade and to do the same with the welcome basket. This simple gesture became legendary within the company and other senior leaders followed suit, without any directives having to be issued. So it would stand to reason that if role modeling is the most powerful leadership tool, then it is the method that should be used to teach culture. I contend that while role modeling empowers corporate culture, it is not possible to “teach” culture. When Bristol Hotels & Resorts acquired a portfolio of over 100 hotels, essentially tripling the size of the company, I was asked by a trade journalist how we were going to export the “culture of service” for which Bristol was renowned, from Dallas to the new hotels. My response was “If we believe we can export culture to each of the hotels, we will fail. Contrary to that notion, we need to have general managers who believe in the culture of service and we need to support that philosophy in the way we do business at the office—role modeling, if you will.”

Among the new general managers that we inherited, generally speaking we found three different types: (1) Those who had served their hearts and believed that by treating employees right, the employees would treat the guest right. These GMs enthusiastically embraced the “new culture” because they already believed in it. (2) Those who understood the words and the concept of the service-profit chain, which establishes relationships between employee satisfaction, guest loyalty, and profitability, but were somewhat skeptical. They were willing to give it a try but not sure. And (3) Those who believed that it is the manager’s job to tell employees what to do and it is the employees’ jobs to do it. The group 1 managers were inspired to achieve even greater success, and they did. I described their reaction as having been “set free” to treat people in the way they thought was right, but had not been able to in the prior organization. Many of the folks from group 2 did as well as the group 1 managers. Among the new general managers that we inherited, many of those who believed that role modeling was the most powerful leadership tool, especially those who were self-selected out (quit), or did not make it in the new company. After all, transparency is key to integrity, at least in my opinion. So it would stand to reason that if role modeling is the most powerful leadership tool, then it is the method that should be used to teach culture. I contend that while role modeling empowers corporate culture, it is not possible to “teach” culture. When Bristol Hotels & Resorts acquired a portfolio of over 100 hotels, essentially tripling the size of the company, I was asked by a trade journalist how we were going to export the “culture of service” for which Bristol was renowned, from Dallas to the new hotels. My response was: “If we believe we can export culture to each of the hotels, we will fail. Contrary to that notion, we need to have general managers who believe in the culture of service and we need to support that philosophy in the way we do business at the office—role modeling, if you will.”

Among the new general managers that we inherited, generally speaking we found three different types: (1) Those who had served their hearts and believed that by treating employees right, the employees would treat the guest right. These GMs enthusiastically embraced the “new culture” because they already believed in it. (2) Those who understood the words and the concept of the service-profit chain, which establishes relationships between employee satisfaction, guest loyalty, and profitability, but were somewhat skeptical. They were willing to give it a try but not sure. And (3) Those who believed that it is the manager’s job to tell employees what to do and it is the employees’ jobs to do it. The group 1 managers were inspired to achieve even greater success, and they did. I described their reaction as having been “set free” to treat people in the way they thought was right, but had not been able to in the prior organization. Many of the folks from group 2 did as well as the group 1 managers. Among the new general managers that we inherited, many of those who believed that role modeling was the most powerful leadership tool, especially those who were self-selected out (quit), or did not make it in the new company. After all, transparency is key to integrity, at least in my opinion. So it would stand to reason that if role modeling is the most powerful leadership tool, then it is the method that should be used to teach culture. I contend that while role modeling empowers corporate culture, it is not possible to “teach” culture. When Bristol Hotels & Resorts acquired a portfolio of over 100 hotels, essentially tripling the size of the company, I was asked by a trade journalist how we were going to export the “culture of service” for which Bristol was renowned, from Dallas to the new hotels. My response was: “If we believe we can export culture to each of the hotels, we will fail. Contrary to that notion, we need to have general managers who believe in the culture of service and we need to support that philosophy in the way we do business at the office—role modeling, if you will.”

Among the new general managers that we inherited, generally speaking we found three different types: (1) Those who had served their hearts and believed that by treating employees right, the employees would treat the guest right. These GMs enthusiastically embraced the “new culture” because they already believed in it. (2) Those who understood the words and the concept of the service-profit chain, which establishes relationships between employee satisfaction, guest loyalty, and profitability, but were somewhat skeptical. They were willing to give it a try but not sure. And (3) Those who believed that it is the manager’s job to tell employees what to do and it is the employees’ jobs to do it. The group 1 managers were inspired to achieve even greater success, and they did. I described their reaction as having been “set free” to treat people in the way they thought was right, but had not been able to in the prior organization. Many of the folks from group 2 did as well as the group 1 managers. Among the new general managers that we inherited, many of those who believed that role modeling was the most powerful leadership tool, especially those who were self-selected out (quit), or did not make it in the new company. After all, transparency is key to integrity, at least in my opinion. So it would stand to reason that if role modeling is the most powerful leadership tool, then it is the method that should be used to teach culture. I contend that while role modeling empowers corporate culture, it is not possible to “teach” culture. When Bristol Hotels & Resorts acquired a portfolio of over 100 hotels, essentially tripling the size of the company, I was asked by a trade journalist how we were going to export the “culture of service” for which Bristol was renowned, from Dallas to the new hotels. My response was: “If we believe we can export culture to each of the hotels, we will fail. Contrary to that notion, we need to have general managers who believe in the culture of service and we need to support that philosophy in the way we do business at the office—role modeling, if you will.”

Among the new general managers that we inherited, generally speaking we found three different types: (1) Those who had served their hearts and believed that by treating employees right, the employees would treat the guest right. These GMs enthusiastically embraced the “new culture” because they already believed in it. (2) Those who understood the words and the concept of the service-profit chain, which establishes relationships between employee satisfaction, guest loyalty, and profitability, but were somewhat skeptical. They were willing to give it a try but not sure. And (3) Those who believed that it is the manager’s job to tell employees what to do and it is the employees’ jobs to do it. The group 1 managers were inspired to achieve even greater success, and they did. I described their reaction as having been “set free” to treat people in the way they thought was right, but had not been able to in the prior organization. Many of the folks from group 2 did as well as the group 1 managers. Among the new general managers that we inherited, many of those who believed that role modeling was the most powerful leadership tool, especially those who were self-selected out (quit), or did not make it in the new company.
Why don’t you take your door off, John?” In those early days of Bristol, we still had fixed wall offices. While “open door” philosophies were in vogue and certainly embraced, “open door” had become taken for granted, and in fact didn’t necessarily promote transparency at all. Indeed, it had become somewhat passe. The day that I called chief engineer Tommy Foster into my office and told him to take my door off, a virtual tsunami of culture change was begun. Employees stopped whispering about what was going on behind closed door meetings, because there weren’t any closed door meetings. For those rare times when a truly sensitive discussion needed to take place, it would often take place during a walk around the hotel—affectionately termed “dumpster walks.”

As we saw the guest satisfaction scores rise, we knew we were on to something. Eight years before: The Service Profit Chain was written,1,2 we had created our own “Hotel Profit Chain.” We continued to find other ways to create transparency and improve two-way communication, understanding that if employees had a comfortable way to share ideas to improve the work environment, and the hotel leadership responded, we would also increase guest satisfaction and, as a result, sales.

In addition to open offices, we implemented open meetings. We discovered that there was a fair amount of speculative chatter about what had taken place at the weekly staff meeting, which included the general manager and hotel department heads. Of course, the typical employee did not know, but perhaps based on preconceived notions, they assumed that whatever was happening within the meeting might lead to bad things for them. A company offers the department heads revolved around improving guest satisfaction or the work environment. So, in an unusual move, I announced that all regularly scheduled department head (staff meetings) would be open for any employee to attend as an observer. Few took me up on the offer, but those who did quickly spread the word that actually “good things” happened at staff meetings. All of a sudden, these meetings ceased to cause chatter and distraction among the ranks of employees.

Recognizing that even with no-door open offices, employees were reluctant to “bother” the GM with issues, we implemented “What’s Stupid (around here)? Meetings.” The name was carefully chosen to show that I acknowledged that we did some stupid things and wanted the employees’ help to uncover them. We randomly invited six or so employees from various departments to meet with me. Armed only with a notepad, I asked the employees to share their observations on things that we could improve. Insincerely, most of the ideas were ways we could take even better care of our guests rather than workplace improvements, but key changes were made as a result of the feedback. One example was the introduction of cell-phones for van drivers. Mobile phones were in their infancy at the time, so it was a pretty revolutionary idea. The point was that because a driver had to return to the hotel before receiving information about a pick-up-pick-ups, these guests had to wait much longer for a van than they might have if the van could have been hailed on route.

These are just a few of the many ideas that were implemented to create a more open and transparent environment, but key to the success was the belief in, and the role modeling of, an employee-centered culture. The not-so-subtle and extremely important by-product of the effort was that we had established a climate of trust, where employees believed in the integrity of their leaders and the organization. ❧

Integrity Dividend Observations Michele Sarkisian

When the honeymoon is over, behavioral integrity drops like a rock. It’s become commonplace to hear new leaders describe themselves as ready change agents with unprecedented transparency and wide-open doors to all who want to be heard, because people are their company’s greatest asset and client and employees alike may “call my direct line and reach me anytime.” This approach works last for the first quarter, second quarter, and maybe even the balance of the fiscal year. But once these executives are measured on their own full fiscal year results, the honeymoon is over and new rules apply that, more times than not, sound quite different from those during the honeymoon period. This is true in any industry. I’ve witnessed it in banking, hospitality, retail, marketing services, consumer products, transportation, and business services, among others. As a consequence, these companies experience challenging levels of leadership and employee turnover; low employee engagement and customer satisfaction scores, and flat or down trending stock prices. They simply cannot deliver results because they have no set of honest values; there are only tired clichés. Leaders who consider themselves self-aware and patronize their employees as being “best in the business” turn around months later and describe themselves as victims of people who are lazy and not accountable, with partners who aren’t aligned to their vision and line managers who aren’t smart enough to “get” their strategies. Employees know the cycle. Those who try to deliver average work and simply wait for the next so-called “change agent” to inject short-term fun during their honeymoon.

So, what does it take to break this nonsensical pattern? Breaking out of this pattern requires integrity-based leadershipship that begins with the board and permeates the leadership team, line management, and, the entire enterprise because it is harked to, lived in, and reinforced—and the misaligned are weeded out. Why? Because the human capital risk is as great a risk as competition, product development, IT and cybersecurity, emerging markets, or anything else. People matter and they are always observing as auditors of what’s said and done. They’ve been trained to be cynics, whether they are employees, partners, or customers, so words matter little and sustained behavioral integrity matters more than anything else. Book after book—including Good to Great,13 Conscious Capitalism,14 Execution,15 Built it Last16 and The Integrity Dividend—have described the successful leaders who delivered sustained results as being those who lived into their promises, sought perspective, made decisions, and were continuous learners. They were humble enough to know they did not know everything! These leaders were authentic. Their internalized values were expressed in words and actions resulting in behavioral integrity. Involved followers responded with buy-in, alignment, and action, which results in business outcomes superior to others in the marketplace. People made the difference. Add to that a reasonably competitive product or service and you have a primary market differentiator. Imagine the following:

• A leader who stakes a teamwork principle will not take a bonus for company performance unless the enterprise (everyone) gets a bonus for company performance;

• A sales VP who espouses preparation and perseverance personally rehashes the rookie salesperson for a big meeting. He role-plays the salesperson first in order to demonstrate how to respond to pressure and difficult questions;

• A CFO who turns in his or her own mistake to the board, with humble acceptance of the mistake (even though made by a subordinate) and then prepares and delivers honest facts to Wall Street;

• A teacher who was “passed the trash” (a 4th grade student who could not read) personally tutored the student on her own time until the student could mainstream with his class;

• An employee copywriter who drops by the printer and stops the press because there is a figure of speech that could offend a minority and the copy must be changed, despite the fact that he or her boss wrote the copy;

• A line manager who makes a habit of “dropping in” on direct reports to see what’s working and what’s getting in the way of work—and then makes changes to remove barriers and eases the process of getting things done;

• A CEO who calls a disheartened client mid-level manager to query what would have been a home run for him or her—and then doing it;

• A CEO known for foul language who owes the language problem and asks the organization to hold him accountable to stop, offering to pay $100 toward a charity of choice for every infringement of his or her clean language promise;

• A CEO stating publicly to the entrepreneur that gossip about him or her is within limits but gossip about anyone else in the company is grounds for dismissal and advising all hands that the alternative to gossip is to help;

• A hotel company signing a code of conduct that removes points from all rooms and trains all employees in how to spot exploitation of children and what to do about it;

• A company goes public and everyone employed there for at least a full year receives some bonus for increasing value of the company, not just the senior executives;

• A company offers a suggestion system where any employee or team may submit an improvement idea (backed by some evidence or reasonable business case); and receives remuneration if the idea is adopted and improvement realized; and

• A company’s recognition system is based on quiet heroes alongside the loud ones where every recognition includes both.

All relationships in life are assessed through the lens of behavioral integrity. We all have expectations. What would or could be different if we simply told one another what our experi-
To have behavioral integrity, we should be loyal to our values.

Integrity and the Challenge of Conflicting Loyalties

Heather Allen

As a child, I learned an early lesson from my older brothers. This lesson was compounded at primary school and finally nailed home at my English boarding school. To split, tell, snitch, or dob someone in was the worst thing you could do. Loyalty came before everything else, and getting someone into trouble meant you would be an outcast for a time. This is a lesson we all learn, to a greater or lesser degree and many take to their adulthood without questioning it. It is pervasive and a huge block to integrity at every level.

As a young woman, most of my friends were considerably older than I. I volunteered at London Lighthouse, a center for people with AIDS. As I was there every week, I became a part of the team and had good friends in senior positions. One day, I was involved in a breach of diplomacy with another organization. I had spent a few days compiling a list of all the services for people with AIDS available in every borough in London. The list was my own notes, which I had not by any means finished. One AIDS coordinator had been particularly unhelpful and had sent it by post to every AIDS coordinator as though it were labelled No. 1. To have integrity with the company, union, neighborhood, or club principles and values before becoming a part of that organization and simply asked for examples of how they lived into those values? The decision to participate is ours as customers, employees, leaders, partners, students, or whatever relationship fits. Choosing wisely matters today more than ever. We simply don’t commit to success when mismatched. Integrity pays dividends.

In one fire service, the discipline officer talked to me about how he was dealing with a situation that had arisen at one of the stations. A group of schoolchildren had been brought to the fire station to look around and learn a bit about fire safety and stopped volunteering several hours afterwards. Because these two people were older friends I admired, though, the event stayed with me.

London Lighthouse was one of the first organizations to publish values and really commit to living them. They were the vanguard of equality and “non-oppression,” as it was called in the ’80s. It was the place visited at night by Princess Diana, to hold the hands of gay men with AIDS. Providing the care creatively and in new ways, they were rigid only about the values and mission of the organization. In this climate, I had made my mistake—not just publicly, but had sent it to the local government AIDS coordinators from someone representing this beacon of diversity and respect.

I was disappointed in my friends, understanding their actions as personal betrayal. They were disappointed in me, not just at my slip up on values but more that I didn’t own up and that I assumed they would cover for me. Although I left, I did learn two important lessons. The first straight away—never commit to writing anything you wouldn’t want published. The other lesson came to me as an “Aha!” moment years later. I finally understood what they meant, that values and service come before personal loyalty. We were up to important work, and it was in danger of being undermined each time one of us allowed ourselves the luxury of a bitchy comment, a juicy piece of gossip, or a cheap laugh at someone else’s expense. I spent a great deal of time thinking about how important that is. Then I made my next career out of sharing that understanding.

In one hospital I worked at, one of the surgeons was being paid to train female aid workers on young girls of African origin. Then and there, this is liable but at that time, the 1980s, it was not talked about, and no one had ever been prosecuted. One of the nurses refused to have any part of it and threatened to report it to the authorities. The surgeons quickly caved, and the nurse found herself without a job. She was not actually dismissed but her life was made so unpleasant she had little choice but to leave. This left everyone else around with a further discomfort. They knew she was right, but they didn’t want to go the same way as their colleague. Ultimately, it meant that a number of people assisted with surgery they knew was illegal. It also went against everything they believed in, and yet they persisted.

So, to what we should be loyal? To have behavioral integrity, we should be loyal to our values. I consult mostly with large, public sector organizations. I work with them on leadership, and when we discuss values, loyalty remains high on the list. It never used to be a topic, but it has become something people care about more than before. Together, we mindfully realized the loyalty of this team to the mission of change. Then we were ready to begin working on how to be an example of a new way of being.

In the British public sector, final salary pensions are common though phasing out. Currently, almost all senior officers within the public sector will have final salary pensions. Some have clauses that count the best 3 months in the final two years of service as final salary. It became regular practice in some organizations to give a friend a temporary promotion in the last year or two of service. It was so much a part of the culture some places that it was freely talked about. I once saw a young office junior point out that the extra pension was coming from the public purse, and his Grammy wasn’t paying her taxes so people could have a better pension than they had without doing better than she had. His exclamation was met with genuine surprise. It was a simple unarguable truth and it brought awareness to the situation. Those people stopped that practice from then on and often challenged plans to temporarily promote. Senior officers will often promote their friends, as do prime ministers and presidents, company directors, and gang leaders. The “family loyalty” issue goes much deeper. At the national level we have some evidence of a truly altruistic willingness to cover up pedophile activity by people in the media, broadcasting, and government at the highest level. People in high office putting loyalty to friends, political party, or newspaper mogul before informing, protecting, and serving the public as they are paid to do.

Governments are willing to go to war against some countries in order to bring democracy or because of civil rights abuses, yet call others friends because they have indispensable raw materials or cheap manufacturing. Loyal to principle except when it costs too much.

For each of these stories, the solution is awareness and a recommitment to mission and purpose. That means working with ourselves and each other and being loyal to what we do and the way that we do it so that we are loyal to the emotional pull of friendship.

So, to answer the title of this compilation, what does integrity look like? For most of us, we don’t notice the small everyday acts of a person sticking to their values. We notice when those are conspicuously absent. We see integrity when someone steps up and brings a sudden awareness to a situation, whistleblow- ers and truth-tellers, though we may not like them for it. We see integrity when someone is publicly committed to their mission, for example, Malala demanding global education for girls, will- ing to be shot and carry on. It’s in the mentors who teach the tough-love lessons, willing to risk the relationship for a relentless
The most successful companies are places where keeping promises is one of the top priorities of everyone in the organization.}

Commitment to their mission. It’s the David who stands up to the Goliath and the young lad who dares to tell the Emperor that he is, in fact, naked. It’s the teenager, bearing scars from terrible head wounds, who stands before global terror and demands rights for girls. And it’s the rare politician who speaks out when all else are silent. We admire these people, we applaud their behavior. They are honest and they are courageous and, to most of us, that’s what integrity looks like, honestly and courage. Feet and mouth pointed in the same direction, we need only emulate it.

Promising: An Integral Part of a Culture of Integrity

Charles Feltman

In his book, Tony Simons makes a useful distinction between what he calls promising integrity, that is, keeping your promises, and values integrity, or behaving in accord with the values you espouse. While most people will tell you they are good at keeping promises, if you ask their bosses, peers, or the people who work for them, you will often get a different picture.

Truth is, most of us aren’t as good at it as we like to think. That’s not surprising given the competing commitments, opposing demands, ever shortening deadlines, and many opportunities for miscommunication in most work environments today. Keeping promises can be challenging.

Yet keeping the promises we make to each other, our teams, customers, suppliers, and the greater enterprise in which we work is crucial for both success and well being. This is something that, with attention and discipline, everyone in the organization can get right. In this piece I’ll take a closer look at key behaviors underlying consistent promising integrity.

As with any form of integrity, keeping promises requires having the intention to do so and consistently acting on that intention. Simply having the intention to keep commitments is insufficient. Without the intention and the action, people will tell you they are good at keeping promises, if you ask their bosses, peers, or the people who work for them, you will often get a different picture.

Promises commit us to taking specific actions. I promise a customer we will deliver the new version of our product on time. I promise my boss that I will complete the drawings by the end of this month. I promise my team I will have the presentation completed and ready their view by the end of the day Wednesday. I promise my employee I will take his idea to senior management.

When we make promises casually, without thinking them through, we greatly increase the risk of failing to deliver. Yet many years of coaching leaders and leadership teams has repeatedly shown me that people in work settings fail to keep the promises they make very often too. In fact, it’s so common in some companies that it is assumed that people will only do what they’ve committed to if they are continually nagged about it (the squeaky wheel syndrome). The costs of this insidious seeming failure—this inattention to keeping promises—are enormous: slipped deadlines, missed opportunities, lost business, resentment, resignation—the list goes on, including, of course, loss of trust.

On the other hand, the most successful companies I’ve had the pleasure of serving as a coach and consultant are places where keeping promises is one of the top priorities of everyone in the organization, from the shop floor to the C-Suite.

Managing to Keep Promises

What makes the difference? Many small things contribute, but there are two characteristics I have observed that are consistently present in successful organizations where promises are consistently kept. One of these is that everyone in the company takes their promises seriously. People intentionally manage their commitments. They don’t over promise. They are clear about what they are promising to do. Why do something and subsequently find that something outside their control will prevent them from fulfilling all or part of their commitment, they let their “customer” know as soon as they possibly can. They are clear about what they are promising to do. Why do something and subsequently find that something outside their control will prevent them from fulfilling all or part of their commitment, they let their “customer” know as soon as they possibly can. They are clear about what they are promising to do.

Promising is a complex process, often supported by using a clear, shared language for making requests and offers, and responding in such a way that the commitment they make is mutually understood and accepted.

Many times my colleagues and I have witnessed teams, working groups, departments, and, whole companies commit to rigorous commitment management—including using this language for clear requests, offers, and responses—that saw marked increases in engagement, collaboration, productivity, innovation, and results. This, in turn, led to greater success and well being for everyone.

In one company, for example, we worked with a group of project managers on the language and behavior of good commitment management. This group had been having serious difficulty delivering projects on time and budget. In some cases the company had lost business and customers as a result. Some of the PMs who attended our workshops chose to consistently apply what they were learning with their teams while others didn’t. Within six months, those who focused on managing commitments were dependably delivering projects on time and budget while the other teams were still struggling.

In another example, the president of a firm I worked with, which had been acquired by a much larger company, was being asked to double their revenue over three years while maintaining profitability. This client knew he had to let go of much of the day-to-day activity of his company so he could focus on strategy. His challenge was trusting his people would keep commitments they’d made. He believed they needed constant reminding or they’d fail to do so. He was committed to his own integrity and trustworthiness but wasn’t considering that building trust also requires extending trust to others. He was trying to be trustworthy on behalf of everyone.

The result was a culture in which his team was dependent on him to remind them of what they were supposed to do. And they did with their same reports on down the line. Once he understood the problem, the president began deliberately substituting a process of commitment management in place of nagging his people. The result over about the next eight months was that the entire culture of the company shifted toward individual responsibility and accountability for action. Since then, the president has been able to focus on what is important in his role.

The Larger Commitment

The other key characteristic I’ve observed is that everyone in the organization understands how requests, offers, promises, and the resulting actions are connected to the larger organizational purpose. They are part of the process of coordinating action in service to the mission and vision shared by everyone. When someone makes a work-related request—whether it’s the CEO or other senior leader, a middle manager, or an individual contributor on the factory floor or engineering lab—both the person making the request and the individual to whom it is directed understands and bought into the larger commitment of their division. At the same time she began teaching them, directly and by example, to make clear, complete requests and offers, and follow through with promises they were committed to fulfilling. Rather than harping on them to manage their time better she taught them to manage their commitments. She made sure they knew she could “say no” to requests if they were prepared to give a good reason for doing so.

Leaders like this woman, no matter what level in their company, thoughtfully and intentionally build trust. They do so by keeping promises and the language and behavior of good commitment management. This group had been having serious difficulty delivering projects on time and budget. In some cases the company had lost business and customers as a result. Some of the PMs who attended our workshops chose to consistently apply what they were learning with their teams while others didn’t. Within six months, those who focused on managing commitments were dependably delivering projects on time and budget while the other teams were still struggling.

In another example, the president of a firm I worked with, which had been acquired by a much larger company, was being asked to double their revenue over three years while maintaining profitability. This client knew he had to let go of much of the day-to-day activity of his company so he could focus on strategy. His challenge was trusting his people would keep commitments they’d made. He believed they needed constant reminding or they’d fail to do so. He was committed to his own integrity and trustworthiness but wasn’t considering that building trust also requires extending trust to others. He was trying to be trustworthy on behalf of everyone.

The result was a culture in which his team was dependent on him to remind them of what they were supposed to do. And they did with their same reports on down the line. Once he understood the problem, the president began deliberately substituting a process of commitment management in place of nagging his people. The result over about the next eight months was that the entire culture of the company shifted toward individual responsibility and accountability for action. Since then, the president has been able to focus on what is important in his role.

The other key characteristic I’ve observed is that everyone in the organization understands how requests, offers, promises, and the resulting actions are connected to the larger organizational purpose. They are part of the process of coordinating action in service to the mission and vision shared by everyone.

When someone makes a work-related request—whether it’s the CEO or other senior leader, a middle manager, or an individual contributor on the factory floor or engineering lab—both the person making the request and the individual to whom it is directed understands and bought into the larger commitment of their division. At the same time she began teaching them, directly and by example, to make clear, complete requests and offers, and follow through with promises they were committed to fulfilling. Rather than harping on them to manage their time better she taught them to manage their commitments. She made sure they knew she could “say no” to requests if they were prepared to give a good reason for doing so.

Leaders like this woman, no matter what level in their company, thoughtfully and intentionally build trust. They do so by keeping promises and the language and behavior of good commitment management. This group had been having serious difficulty delivering projects on time and budget. In some cases the company had lost business and customers as a result. Some of the PMs who attended our workshops chose to consistently apply what they were learning with their teams while others didn’t. Within six months, those who focused on managing commitments were dependably delivering projects on time and budget while the other teams were still struggling.

In another example, the president of a firm I worked with, which had been acquired by a much larger company, was being asked to double their revenue over three years while maintaining profitability. This client knew he had to let go of much of the day-to-day activity of his company so he could focus on strategy. His challenge was trusting his people would keep commitments they’d made. He believed they needed constant reminding or they’d fail to do so. He was committed to his own integrity and trustworthiness but wasn’t considering that building trust also requires extending trust to others. He was trying to be trustworthy on behalf of everyone.

The result was a culture in which his team was dependent on him to remind them of what they were supposed to do. And they did with their same reports on down the line. Once he understood the problem, the president began deliberately substituting a process of commitment management in place of nagging his people. The result over about the next eight months was that the entire culture of the company shifted toward individual responsibility and accountability for action. Since then, the president has been able to focus on what is important in his role.

The other key characteristic I’ve observed is that everyone in the organization understands how requests, offers, promises, and the resulting actions are connected to the larger organizational purpose. They are part of the process of coordinating action in service to the mission and vision shared by everyone.

When someone makes a work-related request—whether it’s the CEO or other senior leader, a middle manager, or an individual contributor on the factory floor or engineering lab—both the person making the request and the individual to whom it is directed understands and bought into the larger commitment of their division. At the same time she began teaching them, directly and by example, to make clear, complete requests and offers, and follow through with promises they were committed to fulfilling. Rather than harping on them to manage their time better she taught them to manage their commitments. She made sure they knew she could “say no” to requests if they were prepared to give a good reason for doing so.
Loyalty needs to be openly discussed and integrated with missions and values, so that workers understand that doing the right thing is not disloyal.

action and the larger commitments their teams, departments, and companies have to their employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and other stakeholders.

These leaders build cultures where trust is deliberately cultivated. Integrity is a lived value in such places. Not surprisingly, promissory integrity comes around and connects back up with values integrity. These kinds of companies often hold other lived values that relate to trust, as well, including transparency, empowerment, gratitude, curiosity, success, and well being. Values the entire organization is committed to matter. What matters equally is that those values are accepted and lived by everyone in the organization.

Implications for Managers and Researchers

Let’s close by considering the implications these five essays offer both for practice and for further research. While there’s little doubt of the efficacy of the suggestions made above, most of these principles remain anecdotal and could benefit from rigorous research.

Schnaubelt: “The Nitty Gritty of Integrity”

Kurt Schnaubelt provides additional anecdotal evidence for my assertion of the effectiveness of simple time management tools, such as Day-Timers and to-do lists, for the management of consistent follow-through and thus of integrity perceptions. It is no accident that Steven Covey, the performance guru behind tools of highly effective people, partnered with Franklin Planners, the maker of Day-Timers. Schnaubelt likewise confirms the importance of verbal precision, the avoidance of casually made promises, and general ineffectiveness of promises qualities as “I’ll try to….” in managing integrity perceptions. These practical suggestions, while probably effective, still warrant careful empirical study to increase confidence in their efficacy. The context of bankruptcy and debt restructuring, as discussed in this essay, is interesting as an opportunity to study and better understand how credibility can be rebuilt after broken promises—as creditworthiness is, in essence, an effort to quantify the credibility of a potential debtor.

Longstreet: Role Modeling, Culture, and Integrity

John Longstreet documents the fact that modeling of desired behavior is critical for promoting behavioral change in others. His essay demonstrates how transparency and receptiveness to suggestions build trust, and how all of these elements help to create a positive organizational culture that is “employee-centered,” while also providing excellent guest service. Longstreet’s discussion of how some managers believed the new vision, and so implemented it successfully, while others did not, suggests an interesting research avenue, as “value congruence” can be examined as both an antecedent to effective organizational change and possibly also as an outcome of it.

Sarkisian: Integrity Dividend Observations

The many examples of integrity proposed by Michele Sarkisian focus on integrity and transparency, with an emphasis on long-term human resource enhancement over short-term gain. Her illustration of the “honeymoon period” is an intriguing notion for further research, since it points to the source of increasingly cynical behavior by executives and employees alike, possibly in response to incentives for short-term financial performance. It would be interesting to document this trajectory, especially if it is as typical as Sarkisian suggests.

Allen: Integrity and the Challenge of Conflicting Loyalties

Heather Allen’s article continues the theme of conflicting values, and highlights the role of loyalty to peers, to the company—and to mission or principle. Her examples of the potentially corrupting effects of loyalty to peers demonstrate how loyalty can sometimes become an enabler of much behavior that we might term “unprincipled.” From a practical standpoint, this argument suggests that loyalty needs to be openly discussed and integrated with other missions and values, to better assist workers in understanding that doing the right thing is not disloyal, and that sometimes loyalty to the enterprise must trump loyalty to peers. From a research standpoint, the argument opens up both a particular value that should be measured alongside others (loyalty), and a perspective that asks why some values are both espoused and enacted, some are espoused but not enacted (classic hypocrisy), and some are enacted but not espoused (like loyalty). Is the challenge here that loyalty is openly espoused, but only to internal audiences? Given the apparent repercussions of this particular driver of divergent words and actions, it deserves to be researched and better understood. A second implication of this piece is the illustration of a phenomenon described by Hennerson as “a double bind,” wherein established behavioral routines conflict with espoused values, creating an organizational context that inhibits honest questioning, learning, and adaptation.

Feltman: Keeping Promises as an Integral Part of a Culture of Integrity

Finally, Charles Feltman highlights the way that we all tend to think we are better at managing promises than others think we are, a finding that has been replicated in research and one that raises the question: what determines accurate self-perception? He discusses the interrelationship between promise-keeping and enactment of espoused values, as two mutually reinforcing aspects of the behavioral integrity construct. From a practical standpoint, he addresses the development of one’s own integrity through a process of prioritizing it and building habits of organization and of communication. He points the way toward creating a culture of accountability with steps that include:

• getting everyone to take commitments seriously,
• learning careful language to use when asking for or making commitments,
• deliberately extending trust,
• holding people accountable,
• sharing the “big picture” purposes behind broad directives (a specific kind of transparency), and
• training employees to manage their commitments well.

The processes he describes are similar to those discussed in my book, but he offers the perspective of someone who has coached numerous organizations through the process of enhancing personal credibility and of building a culture of individual responsibility and accountability. This culture he describes may be a refinement of the high-trust, high-service cultures alluded to by Sarkisian and Longstreet. The nature of the convergence between the cultures described by these three authors warrants thought and articulation.


The Center for Hospitality Research • Cornell University
Cornell Hospitality Report • March 2016 • www.chr.cornell.edu • Vol. 16, No. 5