Executive Insights on Leader Integrity: The Credibility Challenge

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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
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Comments
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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.”

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.” 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.

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2 Ibid.
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 Divided, 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 surveyed and analyzed that have been able to integrate some 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; the lack of integrity is linked to following 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 coaching and to leader efforts to shape the ethical climate. Coaching and ethical initiatives are successful when behavioral integrity is high and high adherence to policies is low. Integrity also affects how workers respond to too much work, termed “role overload.” They may become more overtime and high workloads and thus may tend to work longer hours when behavior is high and cheat when it is low. In short, it appears that many leadership 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 managers 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 organizational members’ increased uncertainty, confusion, and ambivalence, puts manager behavioral integrity at risk.

Regarding situations contributing to integrity, several studies show that while behavioral integrity appears to have impacted 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.

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:

1. What leader initiatives require behavioral integrity in order to work?
2. What personal attributes drive behavioral integrity so we can hire leaders who have more of it?
3. What skills and habits enhance behavioral integrity so we can help existing managers to build it?
4. What contexts put behavioral integrity at risk?
5. What contexts put a 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 Chili’s franchise group as a restaurant manager. This was a dynamic and exciting time with an excellent group of new executives and district managers. I had just finished an intensive 15-week training program and was assigned to one of the Providence-area restaurants. The GM was talented but burned out, and sometimes, the hardest part of integrity is remembering which promises you made in the first place.
Breaking the negative “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, inefficacy, 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 Land of Broken Promises

In fall 2008, 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 are heard on the plan which will become the blueprint for emergence from bankruptcy. The judge may be the place where past promises are washed 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, less-than-creditworthy company through bankruptcy. I was serving as the interim CFO while working through the transition of emergence from Chapter 11 and helping new, permanent management get up to speed. I had developed close relationships with several senior executives at this client, so during the transition, I asked them for some feedback: a couple of positives about my performance and one or two things I could improve. The VP of sales surprised me by saying, “Be careful what you promise.” I was curious as to what he meant because I considered myself cautious with my words. He reminded me about a meeting several months earlier regarding the compensation structure for sales people. I had 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 spent several months crafting an improved solution), 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. Listeners skills are not always equivalent to the ability to hear, understand, and focusing on what the other person is saying rather than 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 another member of the group interrupted me and replied quickly, saying, “I would really enjoy getting together with you soon but based on my travel schedule and yours, that’s improbable. I’m going to be in Los Angeles over the next couple of weeks. Any chance you will get there too?”

As a business person whoquis sic iteratet occasionally, I am keeping a mental list of how to rephrase them. For example, “Call me anytime” is better phrased as, “If you have something you think is worth discussing, send me an email. We can decide if it makes sense to set up a call.” Another key phrase to eliminate is, “I’ll try to [do/call/find/research].” Better to say nothing at all or at least say, “I’ll call to [do/call/find/research].” A radical change in communication and one that does not come easy. Furthermore, responses vary from a surprised look to confusion when you are deliberately truthful. Often the recipient gets a message that is simultaneously unexpected and refreshing but hard to decipher whether to feel honored or shocked. Most business people believe they act with integrity. They pride themselves on telling the truth and acting in a consistent manner. However, it is easy to slip up and allow pecadillos to knock us off track. The Integrity Dividend reminds us that staying on track is important for our company’s profits, not just our own sense of ethics (as important as that may be).

Role Modeling, Culture, and Integrity

John Longstreet

In Tony’s book, Peter Kline discusses his time as CEO of Bristol Hotels & Resorts, then the largest independent hotel management company in North America. Specifically, Kline says: “One of the biggest mistakes that happens over and over again, particularly in big companies, is that senior management expects behavioral patterns or attitudes to originate in the middle of the company, as opposed to from the top of the company. They try to operate with different sets of rules. But the behavior of the entire company is going to reflect the behavioral pattern of the people at the top.”

In helping leaders to develop when I was with Kline at Bristol (or when I was with ClubCorp USA or as CEO of Quaker Steak & Lube), I found that the key to 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 have on hand to satisfy 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 hotels 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. He was told, “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 home 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 servants’ 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 culture, which establishes relationships between employee satisfaction, guest loyalty, and profitability, but were somewhat skeptical. They were willing to give it a try but not too 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 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 and group 3 managers abided by the board either selected out (quit), or did not make it in the new company and culture.

At Bristol, we took open doors to the nth degree. This approach was key in role modeling the first step in the service-profit chain—truly valuing employees. Ultimately, we developed totally open offices in the home office and most of our hotels. This started with the CEO and included all team members. After all, transparency is key to integrity, at least in my estimation, and to employee satisfaction. Bristol’s “open office” role modeling is the most powerful leadership tool, and it is the method that should be used to teach culture.
beginning when I embarked on my first GM job. One day, while
mentioning to Pete the overhearing, we- they atmosphere that I
inherited, he said, “Why don’t you take your door off, John?” In
those early days of Brindel, I was still using formal offices. While
“open door” philosophies were in vogue and certainly em-
phased, “open door” had become taken for granted, and in fact
didn’t necessarily promote transparency at all. Indeed, it had
become somewhat passé. The day that I called chief engineer
Tommy Fonterio into my office and told him to take my door
off, a virtual tsunami of change began. 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 “dumpee 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,11 we had created our own “Hotel Profit Chain.” We
continued to find other ways to create transparency and im-
prove two-way communication, understanding that if employ-
ees 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 presumed, sales.

In addition to open offices, we implemented open meet-
ings. We discovered that there was a fair amount of speculative
chatter about what had taken place at the weekly staff meet-
ing, which included the general manager and hotel depart-
ment 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. In fact, most of the efforts of 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 ac-
tually “good things” happened at staff meetings. Of all the sudden,
these meetings ceased to cause chatter and distraction among
the ranks of employees.

Recognizing that even with no-door open offices, employ-
ees were reluctant to “bother” the GM with issues, we imple-
mented “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 depart-
ments to meet with me. Armed only with a notepad, I asked the
employees to share their observations on things that we could
improve. Ironically, most of the ideas were ways we could take
improved care of our guests rather than workplace improve-
ments, but key changes were made as a result of the feedback.
One example was the introduction of cell-phones for van driv-
ers. 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
pop-up pick-ups, those 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 imple-
mented 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 trans-
parency 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 best 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 bank-
ing, hospitality, retail, marketing services, consumer products,
transportation, and business services, among others. As a conse-
quence, these companies experience challenges levels of leader
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 stay 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? Break-
ning out of this pattern requires integrity-based leaders who
ship that begins with the board and permeates the leadership
team, line management, and the entire enterprise because it
is harder 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—in-
cluding Good to Great,12 Conscience Capitalism,13 Execution,14 Built It Last,15 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 that to 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 compensated performance unless the enterprise (“every-
one”) gets a bonus for company performance;

• A sales VP who espouses preparation and perseverance per-
sonally 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 copierwriter 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 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 disgruntled 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 enterprise 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
porns 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 remunera-
tion if the idea is adopted and improvement is realized;

• 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-
ences in life are assessed through the lens of
behavioral integrity.


All relationships in life are assessed through the lens of behavioral integrity.
To have behavioral integrity, we must be honest with ourselves and each other and be loyal to what we do and the way that we do it.

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 sealed home at my English boarding school. To split, tell, snitch, grass, 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 block to integrity at every level.

As a young woman, most of my friends were considerably older than me. 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 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 secretive and somewhat patronizing. I made a note for myself that he was a wanker (a mild expletive, which we can call our friends with impunity) and the reputation of the center would come to a knock. I naturally assumed my friends would cover for me. They didn’t, and I was furious. I asked them why their “silly little rules” were more important than me, and I took it personally. I left and stopped volunteering soon 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 a new way, 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 “Ahah!” moment later years. 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 any 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 a lot of money to perform female circumcision on young girls of African origin. They made my next career out of sharing that understanding. In one hospital I worked at, one of the surgeons was being paid a lot of money to perform female circumcision on young girls of African origin. They made my next career out of sharing that understanding. In one hospital I worked at, one of the surgeons was being paid a lot of money to perform female circumcision on young girls of African origin. They made my next career out of sharing that understanding. In one hospital I worked at, one of the surgeons was being paid a lot of money to perform female circumcision on young girls of African origin. They made my next career out of sharing that understanding. In one hospital I worked at, one of the surgeons was being paid a lot of money to perform female circumcision on young girls of African origin. They made my next career out of sharing that understanding. In one hospital I worked at, one of the surgeons was being paid a lot of money to perform female circumcision on young girls of African origin. They made my next career out of sharing that understanding.
promises, 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, honesty 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 Simmons 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-shrinking deadlines, and many opportunities for micromanagement in most work environments today. Keeping promises can be challenging.

Yet keeping the promises you make to each other, your 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 from CEO to receptionist 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 necessary but not sufficient. Robert Gass, quoted in Simmons’s book, says, “People give their word casually, and they don’t think it through.”

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 review 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 way too often. In fact, it is 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 squeakiest wheels syndrome). The costs of this insignificant 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 that they won’t be able to do it (Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishing, 2009).

Many times my colleagues and I have witnessed teams, workshops, 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 needed 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’s performance was dependent on him reminding them of what they were supposed to do. And they did it with their peers on down the line. Once he understood the problem, the president began deliberately substituting a process of commitment management in place of nagging people. The result over about the next right 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 being asked to do something and the individual to whom it is committed make the decision whether they think it (the squeakiest wheels syndrome). The costs of this insignificance are too high. How much worse could it have been avoided with better planning?

For 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 the techniques they could use to help them understand how the lines of code she was writing would affect their shared future. She may not understand (or care about) all the elements of company strategy. But she knows enough to appreciate that when her boss asks her to drop what she’s been working on for weeks to go help a team doing a last minute redesign, the request is not capricious, nor is it something that could have been avoided with better planning.

This, in turn, requires strong trust throughout the company. That engineer has to believe the people “at the top” setting company strategy, and the people in the middle deciding how to best implement that strategy, are all working to serve the same mission and vision she does. The leaders have to earn the engineer’s trust in this regard.

I recently had the pleasure of coaching the division head in a large U.S. government agency who learned to make this link for her people. At first she just talked about her team having a strong shared commitment to their larger goals. But her actions were often at odds with this ideal. Not long after she started in the position she gave everyone her vision of changes that would make the division more accurate, timely, and successful. But there was little feedback from the rest of the agency. But when she saw that people weren’t changing how they did things on their own initiative she quickly abandoned her big picture and resorted to giving them detailed direction about each step she wanted them to take.

Then, after a period of coaching, attending an intensive week-long leadership development workshop, some targeted reading, and lots of trial and feedback, she began developing a different approach. She spent time making sure her people understood 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. And this is something that can be learned with a little bit of practice: allowing people to be successful. She made sure they knew they 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. They have had an enormous impact in the number of people they can trust with the critical work of their companies.
Loyalty needs to be openly discussed and integrated with missions and values, so that workers understand that doing the right thing is not disloyal.

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 better known for his book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 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.

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 Hennestad as a “double bind,” wherein established behavioral routines conflict with espoused values, creating an organizational context that inhibits honest questioning, learning, and adaptation.23

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 viewpoint, 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.


18 Steven Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (New York: The Free Press, 1989).