

## The Leadership Seven

### ***Focal Capability: Integrity***

Consult a dictionary, and you will find two definitions of Integrity. Firstly, integrity describes the condition of being honest and having strong, unwavering moral principles. Second, integrity describes the state of being whole and undivided. Understanding both definitions are crucial to grasping integrity's vital role in our lives as leaders. Visualize leadership as a symphony, with each instrument representing an important capability essential to the composition. In this orchestration, integrity emerges as the conductor, ensuring that every note played by the leader resonates with truth and authenticity.

In the following discussion, we consider each definition and will explore integrity's vital role in the life of a leader.

#### **Definition One: Honest and having strong, unwavering moral principles.**

The first definition of integrity describes fidelity to a set of "ethics," which reflect your beliefs, principles, and values important to guiding behavior. The sources of these beliefs, or ethics, are intensely personal and the product of a myriad of influences, including family, teachers, friends, coaches, heroes, and the culture in which we live (to highlight a few). In this way, we all come to our beliefs and values honestly. However, it is rare to find an individual who can clearly articulate a core set of personal beliefs and principles that guide their decisions and actions. Instead, we rely on fuzzy, unchallenged, and unexamined ideas about right and wrong and, when the moment of testing inevitably comes, we are unprepared.

Many professions are guided by professional and ethical codes. For example, attorneys are bound by ethical codes that govern their professional conduct. These rules govern acceptable behaviors and responsibilities, such as client confidentiality, communication, conflicts of interest, fees, and honesty. Violation of these rules can result in a range of disciplinary actions from reprimands to suspensions and even disbarment. Medical doctors are similarly bound. Your physician must place patient welfare first and protect patient confidentiality. Medical ethics help ensure the quality of patient care and maintain the integrity of the medical profession. Like attorneys, offending physicians can suffer negative professional consequences such as disciplinary action, loss of licensure, and other legal repercussions.

The leadership of people comes with no such supporting road map. Instead, managers, sales professionals, entrepreneurs, and many other business professionals are left to make their own decisions about what is and is not ethical behavior.

Ethical lapses, like other behaviors, are a function of two primary inputs-- the person (personality, background, experiences, beliefs, hang-ups/fears, passions, etc.) and the characteristics of the situation. In making decisions about the primary causes of behavior we see in others, we over-credit the person and discount the role of the situation in shaping that behavior. Known as the "fundamental attribution error," we tend to believe that behavior is firmly under the control of the person, and primarily reflects the individual's character, values, personality, and general tendencies. However, significant research and

study demonstrates clearly that this attribution is frequently misplaced. In reality, situations play a powerful, and often dominant role, in shaping behavioral choices. People who consider themselves to be a person of integrity can find themselves quickly compromised when presented with the right combination of situational pressures. Therefore, a leader with integrity must recognize their vulnerability to situational pressures and prepare accordingly.

### ***Preparing for Battle***

**First, decide who you are well before the moment of testing.** As you navigate the Leadership and Professional Development curriculum, you are challenged to take hard introspective looks at your beliefs and values. These efforts are intentional and designed to equip you with clarity about who you are and who you hope to become. In the heat of the battle, we can expect the situation—including time and performance pressures, expedience, and peer influences to operate powerfully. As you will discover, ethical absolutes (e.g., I will never lie; steal; take a short-cut) are challenging in the shadow of situational complexity and we can quickly construct rationalization to support violating these principles. Clarity of belief insulates you against these situational pressures by providing yourself with an answer to these inevitable moments in advance, apart from the demands of the moment. Every leader should be able to articulate a well-considered set of ethical principles they will use to guide their behavior. As importantly, leaders should understand why these beliefs are important to them; and the lines they will not cross in terms of decision-making and behaviors.

**Second, recognize that speed is an enemy.** In transitioning from school to career, a frequent surprise to former students is the speed and complexity of life in most modern organizations. Change is frequent. Customers are demanding. Competition is fast moving and fierce. In such environments, decisions come quickly, and the ethical ramifications of a decision are not always evident. Decisions present themselves, are made, and you move to the next challenge or decision quickly. Unfortunately, when the downstream consequence of a decision inevitably becomes clear, life affords us no rewind button. The trick is to recognize when a decision has an ethical dimension that demands we slow down and precede carefully.

**Third, recognize that ethics are about others.** The hallmark of an ethical decision is any decision that will impact others. The tension between self-enrichment, or the prioritization of your personal interest, and the interests of others lies at the heart of most ethical decisions and lapses. If a decision holds the potential to impact or harm others, a leader is well-advised to slow down and give careful and thoughtful consideration before moving forward. We are naturally biased to decisions that serve our own interests and provide us with some advantage or outcome we value. A leader with integrity, however, navigates these circumstances by fully contemplating the stakeholders in a decision and anticipating and prioritizing these impacts to serve the diverse interests represented. It is no coincidence that the darker forms of leadership—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and even sociopathy hold in common an exclusive focus on self-interest as the primary motivational driver of decisions and actions. Prioritization of the interests of others, on the other hand, operates as a first consideration of great leadership.

**Fourth, recognize that it often starts small.** Major, reputation damaging ethical lapses rarely begin with major transgression. Instead, they begin with small compromises to your beliefs. These small compromises, especially when unnoticed or consequence free, empower the incremental growth in our willingness to compromise our beliefs. Further, the axiom “it is not the crime, it is the cover-up” frequently proves true

as a decision to compromise beliefs creates an on-going obligation to obscure the compromise. A decision to lie, as an example, places an obligation on the individual to recall and support the lie in future interactions. The consequence is small things become big things. If you examine most corporate fraud cases, the headline making “big sin” is often traceable to a small decision that placed demands on the future to cover or perpetuate that lie or deception. The anecdote, of course, is to avoid small compromises and, when they occur, to own and correct them immediately.

**Fifth, choose your friends (and organizations) carefully.** Voltaire famously stated, “no snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.” When ethical lapses are common or pervasive in an environment, the pressure is compounded, and we can rationalize our own participation in these behaviors by pointing to others and saying, “everyone is doing it.” When we witness others engage in behaviors or choices that are considered unethical to gain an advantage, we are confronted with the choice of also engaging in these behaviors or forfeiting the advantage these behaviors provide. Moreover, consensus in behavior and beliefs builds the illusion of morality, explaining why most of history’s major ethical and moral atrocities are committed by large groups of people. For this reason, never underestimate the power of pressure towards conformity or mistake behavioral conformity for an indicator of good or just actions.

Not surprisingly, an especially critical actor in these circumstances is the leader. Research shows that an organization's moral or ethical tone is established and enforced by its senior leadership. When leaders model ethical or unethical behavior or decision-making, the organization will reflect these tendencies. Leaders of integrity are therefore extremely careful about the company they keep, the organizations they join, and the leaders they follow.

**Finally, exercise caution when the stakes are high.** When the outcomes of a decision are highly valued personally, we are especially at risk. Naturally, our capacity to contrive a rationale for suspect behavior is strongest when there is a lot at stake. Promotions, sales bonuses, performance evaluations, concealing a mistake, or obtaining some outcome (include course grades), when highly valued by you, challenge your convictions and can tempt you into making a reputation, and sometime life damaging decision. This vulnerability is especially acute when we perceive the risk of getting caught as low or emotions prevent an objective examination of the problem. Finally, the will to do the right thing requires real effort. And for most (read: all) people, will is exhaustible. Fatigue, exhaustion, or simply the volume of work can lower our defenses and make us vulnerable to making unethical decisions. However, the risk of discovery is never zero and it is always wise to consider the value of a near-term outcome relative to the potential long-term cost of compromising your integrity.

### ***When you still are not sure***

Advance reflection and recognition of situational influences are important to protecting and preserving your integrity in the heat of battle. However, you will still find yourself in circumstances that leave you stumped or searching for the right answers. Battle-tested strategies to apply in these moments include:

***Gone Viral Test.*** When contemplating a decision, close your eyes and imagine your decision and behaviors are laid bare before the world to see on social media. If you blush when that moment enters your mind, you would be wise to abstain from these behaviors and decisions.

**Third Party Guidance.** Seek feedback from a trusted, but uninvolved, other. Because the individual is not invested in the decision, they can provide objectivity unavailable to you in these moments. Select individuals whose judgement and integrity you trust.

**Take the long view.** Few things are more personal or potentially damaging than having your integrity questioned. To be found to be dishonest can forever damage trust, derail your leadership, and shape your reputation. Conversely, there are few higher compliments than to be regarded as an individual who lives their lives with integrity. The decisions you make and how you behave as a leader will be the ultimate determinant of the reputation you earn. The most direct and expedient path to success is rarely the path of high integrity, as it frequently requires short-cuts and questionable behavior. In contrast, the path of integrity requires patience and a willingness to take the 'long way,' frequently requiring the sacrifice of some short-term advantage or outcome. The path most expedient path to short-term success, which entails compromises and short-cuts, also includes a cost—which comes later and is often greater. Mindfulness related to long-term potential impacts protects us from short-term situational pressures and thinking.

**If in doubt, don't.** Trust your instinct. If you are persistently unsure of whether a decision or behavior is ethical or unethical, abstain from that behavior. We are all gifted with a conscience, which provides a quiet voice and a gentle tug away from behaviors that entail compromising your integrity. While this voice is louder for some than others, we are all wise when we heed these warnings.

## **Definition Two: The state of being whole and undivided**

The second definition of integrity describes the state of being whole and undivided. Stated another way, to present a consistent character and way of being across all circumstances. Increasingly, we are understanding the value and power of "authentic leadership." Authentic leadership emphasizes genuine, honest, and transparent relationships between leaders and followers, where both are open about their values, beliefs, and motivations. This approach presumes that you are first clear about your own beliefs, values, and ethical principles and are committed to the consistent application of these ethical principles in all you do.

When a leader is authentic, the consistency between their words and actions enhances their credibility, making it easier for others to believe in, trust and follow them. Additionally, an authentic leader encourages others to be clear and open in expressing their individual values and beliefs, thereby promoting open communication, creativity, and problem solving. This type of leadership promotes a culture of inclusivity, respect, and mutual support.

Authentic leaders also recognize their importance in shaping the team's culture and behavioral norms. They understand that that talk is cheap and the ultimate test of their beliefs and values is their behavior. An authentic leader, who is both open and clear in their beliefs and committed to acting in accordance with these beliefs, regardless of situational pressures, provides a powerful model for others. Their actions and decisions set a standard for the entire organization, influencing others to act with integrity and authenticity.

A word of caution. It is easy to say you believe in honesty, and another thing altogether to live that out daily. A commitment to honesty takes many forms—how you communicate, how you respond to

mistakes, etc., and you should recognize that holding out honesty as a closely held belief or principle will place demands on your future actions. If you say it, you must live it. Otherwise, credibility and trust are damaged, and the impact is invariably deleterious to communication and culture. In sum, do not say it if you are unprepared to live it.

Sooner rather than later, you will be confronted with a moment that doing the “right thing” will cost you something. Perhaps it means sacrificing short-term success or pleasure, a key client, or even a friend. Contrast this sacrifice against the long-term value of preserving your reputation for integrity and being considered a leader worth following. In this contrast, the path of integrity is often made clear.

### **It is your move...**

As leaders navigate the complex landscapes of decision-making and influence, it is the unwavering commitment to honesty, transparency, and moral fortitude that separates the ordinary from the extraordinary. Here are some ideas for thought exercises you can engage in immediately to ensure you are prepared to lead with integrity.

- Consider your own trustworthiness. Are you known as a person who keeps promises, upholds commitments, and can be relied on to tell the truth? Ask others for their candid feedback and opportunities for you to improve.
- Describe a leader worth following. How do they navigate decisions that impact others? What are their key contemplations? If you were asked to lead a group of close associates tomorrow, how might they compare you to this ideal boss you described? What short-term actions can you take to move yourself closer to being a “leader worth following.”
- Consider the major influences in your lives—parents, coaches, and current and future bosses. What ethical principles did they impress on you most firmly? What is missing?
- Find a mentor or trusted friend to serve as an accountability partner. In your more challenging decisions, an accountability partner can serve as a neutral third party needed to help you sort through the myriad of situational pressures and interests and select the most ethical path.
- Imagine you are being described at the end of your life. What do you hope you will hear related to your ethics and integrity? Where do you need to recalibrate to earn that desired description?
- Spend time in quiet reflection related to your own ethical code. What does a leader with integrity look like for you? What are the most important principles, behaviors, or ideas in your ethical code? Draft a one-page document outlining your code.

### **Suggested Reading**

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