



## INTEGRITY — YOURS TO KEEP

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Over a decade ago I wrote an article about integrity. I had attended an educational course entitled “Living Right Side Up in an Upside Down World,” which opened by introducing the notion that the greatest challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace is living with integrity. The presenter, David W. Thomas, is president of IntegriTalk, a company which stresses the importance of integrity through motivational speeches and interactive seminars. Given the current climate we are all dealing with, I thought it might be helpful to revisit the topic.

I have a close friend who is my role model where integrity is concerned. That’s because she does the right thing, always, just because it is the right thing to do. She does what is right regardless of who is watching or who will know. She does the right thing regardless of whether or not she can get away with not doing it. She does the right thing regardless of pressure to do otherwise, or the expediency of doing otherwise.

She is not only true to herself, but to all of those around her. And I find myself sometimes in awe of her depth, personal conviction, and unwavering dedication to doing what is right, instead of what is expedient. Even though I am a moral and honest individual, I humbly admit I am not made of the same stuff as my friend. And having worked with her organization on a consulting basis, I can see that her integrity has had a tremendous impact on the culture of the organization.

We see daily examples of glaring lapses of integrity in the news. Now I challenge you to ponder who at your firm has made a conscious effort to set an example of unwavering integrity, and to create a sphere of influence which weaves the desire to do the right thing into the very fabric of the firm. Who at your firm not only has a point of view about what is right, and actively works to do what is right, but who also demonstrates integrity at the highest level by taking a stand to correct what is not right? It’s easy to lose one’s way in today’s challenging environment. It all starts with a deceptively small compromise or an even smaller rationalization.

I once had a managing partner threaten to fire me because I refused to install a bootleg copy of software on his computer. He felt entitled because he had already purchased many legitimate licenses for the office. He was the boss, and he was outraged that I would not comply for that reason alone. I did learn something about

integrity back then. First, we have to have a fair amount of courage to stand up for our convictions. And second, we have to be prepared to take responsibility for and accept the consequences for our actions. I stood up to the managing partner, and ultimately did not get fired. But my backbone cost me dearly for several years in “payback” behavior. My response to that reality, which has been carefully crafted from years of experience, is, “Oh well!”

Probably one of the defining aspects of integrity is the manner in which individuals and organizations deal with adversity. It’s easy to do the right thing in good times. But doing the right thing in the worst of times shows what people and organizations are really made of.

Integrity is one of those intangibles which can affect us in very tangible ways. It is also one of the only things we can possess which cannot be taken from us without our consent. People can have the power to take our wealth, health, freedom, objects of desire, and even our ideas. But they cannot take our integrity without our willing consent. And most things of importance in our lives must be defended. But integrity needs no defense. No one has to make an excuse for being truthful and honest in all regards.

Our firms, and the people within them, are led from the path of integrity in many ways. One of the top ways is a lack of an ability to prioritize. Where do we place integrity in the constant juggle of the key components of our life: work, family, friends, materialism, and so forth? It becomes so easy to set aside our principals in the name of family or friends or success.

How easy is it for us to rationalize that maintaining integrity is not of the highest priority? First there’s the “everyone does it” argument. If it’s accepted practice can it really be wrong? I can just hear my mother saying, “If everyone jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge, would that make it the right thing to do?” Her generation is a lot clearer on answering these integrity questions than mine, I must admit. Her world was and is much more black and white, whereas mine is a blizzard of gray.

Another source for rationalization is “who’s going to know?” If no one knows, is anyone really hurt by it? Oh, if only it were possible to compartmentalize our lives such that WE would not know what we’ve done, or such that what we did in one area of our lives didn’t bleed over into all other areas. So aside from the fact that time and circumstances will eventually bring most actions or inactions to light,



the simple fact is that WE will always know what our actions have been, even if no one else ever does. So who is hurt by it? As my mother's generation would say, "You're only cheating yourself."

Thinking about these things will not make you wealthier. They may not even make you happier. But I promise they will not be an exercise in futility.

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