

Maximize your leadership potential: **BUILD TRUST**

Integrity

Cultivating Leadership Integrity

We know that integrity is vital for effective leadership (see sidebar). There are, however, two common misconceptions that can deceive leaders into thinking they don't really need to pay attention to cultivating their own integrity. The first is that integrity is just about ethics—it means not cheating, lying, stealing, etc. A second misconception, related to the first, is that you've either got it or you don't. You're either a good person or you're not. When we fully understand integrity, we can see that both of these misconceptions are wrong.

In this job aid we will explore the two common definitions of integrity in the leadership literature. First, integrity means **congruence**. Steven M. R. Covey describes this beautifully: “While integrity means honesty, it’s much more. It’s integratedness. It’s walking your talk. It’s being congruent, inside and out. It’s having the courage to act in accordance with your values and beliefs.” Second, integrity is also described as **wholeness**. As author Henry Cloud describes in his book titled *Integrity*, “When we are talking about integrity, we are talking about being a whole person, an integrated person, with all of our different parts working well and delivering the functions that they were designed to deliver.” Cloud describes integrity as an integration of the different components of your character.

When we start to understand integrity as living in accordance with your values and beliefs as well as being a whole person, integrating fundamental character traits, we can begin to see that real leadership integrity is much more than being ethical. It's essential to be ethical. If you lie, cheat, and steal you can't have integrity. But there are many leaders who consider themselves highly ethical yet consistently fail to demonstrate the congruence and wholeness of true integrity. That is why the second misconception is also wrong. The congruence and wholeness of integrity doesn't happen overnight. Most of us will work throughout our lives to cultivate greater levels of congruence and wholeness. Let's explore both of these definitions of integrity in more detail.

Integrity as Congruence

How does a leader cultivate her or his integrity? When viewing integrity from the perspective of congruence, the best place to start is with self-awareness. If, as Covey notes above, integrity means

Why it matters?

*Many people insist not only that integrity is important for leadership, but that it is **the most** important quality for leadership. Employee surveys consistently reinforce this perspective. In a FranklinCovey survey of more than 54,000 employees on the essential qualities of a leader, “Integrity was, by far, the number one response.” In fact, integrity approximately doubled the second most common response (ability to communicate). When a leader lacks integrity, people can't trust her or him. As Warren Bennis notes, “Integrity is the basis of trust...and without it, the leader can't function.*

living in accordance with your values and beliefs, it's important to be clear on what those core values and beliefs are. While this sounds obvious, it's a vital first step. Most leaders on this campus are very busy—professionally and personally! Few have taken time to reflect on the principles or beliefs that matter most to them. These are the types of things that, if violated, will cause someone to leave a job or a relationship. When a leader clearly understands these core values or beliefs, they can become guideposts for her behavior. For most leaders, there are certain principles that are more important to them than achieving success—things like respect, excellence, service to others, innovation, joy, and so on. These core values differ from leader to leader. For some leaders creativity is a core value. For others, creativity wouldn't even occur to them as a core value. For some, an uncompromising commitment to excellence is a core value. For others, excellence would be hollow if it violated a value of loyalty.

The core values themselves depend on the person, the key for this type of activity is clarifying those values that are most important *to you*. To get started, it's helpful to focus on a few (no more than five) core values—those values that really define what's most important to you as a person. The next step is to reflect on what those values look like in action, especially in terms of your role as a leader. For example, if respect is one of your core values, how will you demonstrate that value in action on a daily basis to the people with whom you work? Here's how one leader might define that value in action:

- How will I demonstrate my core value of respect through my behavior? When I am meeting with my employees, I will give them my full attention (no email, answering the phone, etc.). I will “seek first to understand” when considering ideas and perspectives of employees.

If this sounds too straightforward, consider how often leaders violate their own values in small ways: the leader with a core value of excellence who doesn't give a direct report feedback because he knows it will be a very uncomfortable conversation, or the leader with a core value of respect who lets her frustration get the better of her and publicly berates a team member in a team meeting. These leaders, like most, would be better leaders if they were simply more consistent about acting in ways that reflect those principles that are *already* important to them. Clarifying what those core principles or beliefs are, what they look like in action, and then ruthlessly self-assessing the ways in which the leader can do better in demonstrating and living a commitment to those values and beliefs can be a powerful driver of greater integrity. It's a powerful tool for cultivating increased and more consistent congruence between what a leader believes and how she or he behaves on a regular basis.

Integrity as Wholeness

Defining integrity in terms of wholeness provides a different, and complementary, perspective on the challenge of cultivating integrity. As Henry Cloud notes, everyone has different strengths and weaknesses, but our overall effectiveness as leaders requires a foundation in the integrity of a whole character. He highlights six character traits that must all be present and, therefore, integrated. They include:

- The ability to connect authentically
- The ability to be oriented to the truth
- The ability to work in a way that gets results and finishes well
- The ability to embrace, engage, and deal with the negative
- The ability to be oriented toward growth
- The ability to be transcendent

The ability to connect authentically—Connecting authentically means being able to empathize with others, to understand how they perceive a situation. It also means having a genuine interest in the other's success. Finally, it means being vulnerable. Leaders who create connection don't try to hide their imperfection, but face their faults and

imperfections directly and deal with them, providing a model with which others can identify and by which they can be inspired.

The ability to be oriented to the truth—Put simply, “reality is always your friend.” Most leaders have experienced that desire to just look away from some uncomfortable truths—the employee who isn’t performing well, the project that isn’t going well, or the relationship with another team that is strained. They hope things will just get better on their own. Unfortunately, things almost never get better on their own. Leaders are never served well by pretending things are different than they are. Cloud notes that we can only make the reality we live in better “by seeing what is going on there and dealing with it head-on.” This orientation also includes a genuine desire for feedback.

The ability to work in a way that gets results and finishes well—Key factors in this character dimension include a willingness to prepare, the ability to focus with purposeful, goal-oriented action, and perseverance. With respect to perseverance, Cloud notes, “The ability to keep going when we hit an obstacle, to believe that there is a way to get it done, and to keep going until we find it is one of the most important character abilities that we can ever develop.”

The ability to embrace, engage, and deal with the negative—As noted above, an integrated character is oriented to truth—even and especially when news may not look good. An integrated character faces negatives directly and seeks to solve them. More importantly, it does not see facing negatives as something painful, but “as an opportunity to make things better and get to a good place.” More than facing the negative, leaders with integrity *embrace* the negative as an opportunity to make things better.

The ability to be oriented toward growth—Not only does the integrated character face and solve problems, but beyond that it fosters a drive to grow, to increase skills and capacities. This means investing time and money into growth and learning. As Cloud notes, “In successful people’s lives, there is no time when they ‘have time’ to do things that are future-oriented. Therefore, they do not wait until they have time. They make the time, first.”

The ability to be transcendent—People who lack character act as if they are the center of the world—whether it’s good news or bad news, what matters is how it relates to them. People of strong character understand that there are causes, values, and missions that are much greater than them. The ability to be transcendent means understanding and being open to that which is greater than oneself.

Integrity is vital to effective leadership and it isn’t fixed. Cultivate your own integrity as a leader by knowing what’s most important to you and challenging yourself to lead in a way that reflects that (congruence). But also cultivate your own integrity as a leader by getting consistently better with the six fundamental character traits of authentically connecting with others, facing the truth, getting results, embracing the negative as an opportunity, focusing continually on growing and learning, and, finally, understanding that true greatness comes from serving something greater than yourself (wholeness).

References

Cloud, Henry. 2006. *Integrity: The Courage to Meet the Demands of Reality*. New York, NY: Collins.

Covey, Stephen M. R. and Merrill Rebecca R. 2006. *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*. New York, NY: Free Press.