A Matter of INTEGRITY

What exactly is integrity and why is it so critical for today’s leaders to possess?

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Over the past two years, we each have been involved in a number of conversations about leader integrity, either for business research articles on integrity and leadership, for leadership courses we are teaching, for our leadership coaching and consulting work, or for our work developing and hosting the Leadership Conversations series sponsored by the Creighton University College of Business and Cox Business.

We have learned that: 1) leader integrity is universally held as one of the, if not the, most important leadership attributes; and 2) its importance is rivaled only by our lack of clarity of what it truly means and why it is so important. Too often, our approach to leader integrity follows Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous line about pornography, “I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.”

Leadership expert Tony Simons, author of *The Integrity Dividend*, notes that, in 2005, “integrity” was the single most looked-up word in Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary — suggesting that “people are very interested in the concept [of integrity], but are not exactly sure what integrity means.” While Merriam-Webster defines integrity as a “firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values,” that description does not fully inform us as to the real-world complexities of the word. Let’s dig a little deeper.

**Integrity and Internal Consistency**

The root of all integrity judgments is a sense of consistency or congruence between seemingly disparate elements. To have integrity means that things fit together in a coherent form. For leaders, it means that a leader’s values, beliefs, words and actions are consistently aligned with each other and with the external contexts in which they are held.

We have found little disagreement on the importance of consistency; however, things get more interesting when discussions turn toward just what should be consistent to indicate integrity.

In a 2007 article published in the *European Management Journal*, professors Michael Palanski and Francis Yammarino reviewed recent research on integrity and leadership and came up with different classifications for defining integrity in terms of consistency. Professors Palanski and Yammarino’s classifications can be considered “internal consistency” definitions, because they are all based on the idea that things internal to the leader should be consistent with each other. These definitions all identify how a leader’s own values are aligned with his or her own words, which are aligned with his or her own actions.

Leading the list was the most general but vague definition of integrity as “wholeness,” reflecting its Latin root of “integer.” Integrity as wholeness may refer to something like the integrity of the hull of a ship, suggesting that the hull is watertight, or the integrity of a bridge, where the two ends are anchored and the span supported. For leaders, integrity as wholeness speaks to a general consistency among all elements of a person, such as the person’s values, beliefs, words and actions. Philosophy professor Dwight Furrow notes in *Ethics: Key Concepts in Philosophy* that integrity is “the extent to which our various commitments form a harmonious, intact whole.”

Integrity as “wholeness” may underlie recent efforts to describe authentic leadership. Bill George, former CEO of Medtronic and now a professor at the Harvard Business School, described leaders in his book *True North* as those who lead based on the complete consistency of all elements in their lives.

George is passionate that leading means learning from the hard and soft lessons of life, extracting wisdom from our crucibles and our victories. Our authenticity is shaped by our journey and what it teaches us about being more aware and present in the experience of leading and living. Followers experience that as alignment, of possessing behavior that is integrated with our beliefs.

Richard Parsons, former chairman of Time Warner Inc., board chair of Citigroup and the first guest for Creighton’s Leadership Conversations, told us that “genuine integrity results from the integration of all of your life experiences, so you are true to yourself in every situation. Your consistency in doing what is right offers others a sense of your True North. It’s why they trust and follow you.”

Frank Rovekamp, chief marketing officer for the Vodafone Group, also believes that integrity requires a true consistency with one’s core values. Rovekamp considers integrity as “part of [a leader’s] being, not as dogma” and emerges from leaders who “have a true sense of themselves.”

A second classification promulgated by Palanski and Yammarino focuses on consistency in a leader’s words and actions. Often captured by clichés such as “walk the talk” or “practice what you preach,” word/deed consistency refers to a leader who, as James Kouzes and Barry Posner note in *The Leadership Challenge*, will DWYSYWD — “Do What You Say You Will Do.”

In *The Integrity Dividend*, Simons calls word/deed consistency “behavioral integrity” and his research shows that follower perceptions of a leader’s word/deed consistency are directly linked to various measures of financial performance and “might be a more important performance driver than employee satisfaction, commitment, sense of trust or feelings of fairness.”

A third classification or definition describes the special case of consistency in the face of adversity. A leader with integrity will not only take a position that is consistent with his or her values and pronouncements when things are going...
well, but will also do so when faced with a threat challenging that position. This occurs when a leader remains steadfast even when confronted with challenges or temptations. As Lynne McFall notes in the journal *Ethics*, “We admire those who stand up for their beliefs when they have something to lose.”

Among many of the leaders we interviewed, this concept informed their definitions of integrity. They often spoke of the willingness to admit failure, regardless of what was at stake. Andrea Ragnetti, our most recent guest for Leadership Conversations and the CEO of Philips Consumer Lifestyle, particularly imbues the willingness to take risks and stand up for what you believe in, in his definition of leader integrity. He told us, “It takes courage to accept the consequences of your choices, and such courage is the hallmark of a person with integrity.”

**Integrity and Consistency with External Values**

Is an internal consistency — either between values and beliefs or words and actions — enough to be judged by others as having integrity? While it does inform us of someone’s integrity, it is an incomplete picture. Integrity becomes simply a judgment about process (How consistent are you?), rather than a judgment about content (About what are you consistent?). This can be troubling.

For example, in the leadership classes we teach, students often ask the question, “Was Hitler (or another example of an evil person) a good leader?” We never believe that the student is seeking a justification for Hitler’s actions. We just believe the student is trying to argue a more academic point that leadership may be more about the process of change rather than the content of that change. We answer this by asking: Is leadership a value-free process or is it appropriate to include an evaluation of what the leader asked followers to do? Much discussion ensues.

The same type of question could be asked about leader integrity. Are we simply judging integrity on internal consistency or is it better to include an evaluation of how appropriate the consistent words or actions are? We believe there is great value in expanding the internal consistency definitions to include judgments of external consistency — judgments regarding the degree to which what leaders believe, profess and do are consistent with others’ beliefs about what is right, moral and just.

In our conversation with Ragnetti, he attributed his integrity to both “a group of universal ethical values and a set of personal values that are nonnegotiable.” His integrity emerged not only from his own core values, but also from the way those values aligned with universal values held by his followers.

Peter Cheese, Accenture’s managing director of human performance, told us that he believes that, at its core, leader integrity is based on a trust between leader and follower. That trust is created by the leader’s internal consistency of his or her values, beliefs and actions, but it also reflects the follower’s belief that the leader understands the follower’s needs, values and perspectives. Trust occurs when followers believe not only that their leader’s words and actions are aligned, but that those words and actions align with the values of those they lead.

Rajesh Subramanian, senior vice president for FedEx’s international marketing, offered an example of how his integrity is shaped by his ability to adjust and align his values to the values held by his followers. When he learned that FedEx Canada had slipped in the “Top 50 Places to Work” rankings, he knew the best way to solve this was to respond directly to FedEx Canada’s concerns. Always a place where “high touch” leadership practices were valued, he launched a marathon of conversations with his employees, or in FedEx language, he “walked the belt.” When his associates sensed his personal commitment to responding to their concerns, morale surged and performance improved. Subramanian correctly aligned his actions with the values held by those he was leading, and, the following year, FedEx Canada was back on the list.

The practices of these and other leaders show us that integrity is not only about the consistency of internal beliefs, values and actions, but is also a consistency with the moral frameworks that show us what is right within our organizations and communities. We believe it is better to think of integrity as not only being consistent, but also as being consistently right.
Why Do These Definitions of Integrity Matter?

In sum, leaders with integrity offer a range of consistencies in their values, beliefs, words and actions — such that these are all internally consistent with each other and are externally consistent with the values and moral fabric of the constituencies they are trying to lead. Why is it important to believe that leader integrity considers both internal and external consistencies? The answer lies in the information that each judgment makes available to followers, because these definitions offer key insight into why leader integrity matters so much.

One particular paradox of the leadership process is that followers, who are normally consigned to the less powerful role in the leadership relationship, actually control a very important initial decision: the decision to follow. Much of what goes on early in the leadership process is the leader trying to convince followers that following him or her is the best course. For example, think about what all presidential candidates do before elections. Given all the pandering, handshaking and baby kissing, is there really a question of whether followers have power?

Because a decision to follow is really a follower prediction of what the leader will do in the future, anything like integrity that links past and present values, beliefs and words to future actions becomes a very important, if not the most important, judgment. The decision to follow is really a “leap of faith” decision that the leader will follow through on what was promised. Integrity matters because it communicates fundamentally important information that helps make a decision to follow quite easy to accept.

Based on internal consistency definitions, integrity tells followers that the leader’s values, beliefs and words will directly lead to future actions. When followers are deciding to follow, they do not have access to the future results of the leadership effort. Instead, followers are asked to predict what will happen and, based on the leader’s words, decide whether that prediction warrants the sacrifices required of followership. Integrity means that those words matter and can be trusted.

Additionally, if we accept the view that leader integrity also includes external consistency, attributions of leader integrity tell followers about the morality of what the leader will do and what the leader will ask the follower to do. The information conveyed by integrity would also tell followers whether the leader would ever ask them to act against their own values and morals. External consistency means that the followers can trust that the leader would not place them in morally or ethically dubious positions.

Leading with Integrity: The Best Option

We believe leaders have many reasons to act with integrity because of what integrity is and what it signals to followers. Do you, as a leader, give your followers the information they need to decide to take the leap of faith and follow you? Integrity is your leadership brand; it communicates your value proposition of what following you will bring. We believe that all leaders will benefit from asking themselves the following:

- Do your followers know where you stand on both the articulated and unarticulated issues that may arise from your leadership effort? Can they predict your actions from your words, values and beliefs?
- Do your followers know that while you may ask them to perform in ways that may challenge their views of the world, your decisions will still be harmonious with their ethical standards and moral values? Do they know you may challenge them, but you would never violate their moral frames?
- Do your followers know that even when all else is falling down, there are previously known and agreed-to principles that will still be standing in the end? Do they know that even if circumstances turn virtually every other idea on its head, the compelling reasons to follow you still exist?

Why must followers know these things? Because followers must predict what will happen if they follow. With integrity, our past can convey our future and communicate how well that future will follow the past.

In a time when the “magical thinking” of cheap money, ever-rising portfolios, abundant natural resources and little accountability have so clearly led leaders astray, leading with integrity has never been more important. We must lead using the timeless values of honesty, courage and accountability. We can no longer allow greed to take trust and integrity hostage. People follow leaders they trust and the best way to elicit trust is to lead with integrity.

Ignatian Values Permeate Mission

Creighton University strives to educate women and men who are not only proficient in their professions but enlivened with a spirit of service to create a more just world. The Creighton mission is rooted in Jesuit, Catholic core values of self-awareness, integrity, love and service. These ideals are exhibited through the implementation of the mission throughout Creighton’s campus, schools, colleges and programs. Students become confident leaders because they are challenged to reflect on these transcendent values and incorporate ethical and moral principles into their lives, always keeping in mind the needs of those forgotten by society. To help strengthen Creighton’s mission and values, please contact the Office of Development at 800.334.8794.