

MAINTAINING INTEGRITY

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Introduction

Not many people can look in the mirror and beam with pride for having incorporated integrity—the bedrock of good character—into their professional and personal lives. Many politicians, leaders, managers and employees are guilty of compromising integrity in their daily actions. Major examples are taking bribes; misappropriating funds; using misleading facts and lies to defend positions or to cover up blunders; promoting self-interest at the expense of others and the organization; making false claims; misusing organizational resources; rewarding undeserving “yes-men”; not honouring commitments; spending an inordinate amount of time on personal business at work; and taking home office stationery. Based upon data gathered through my consulting experiences in numerous organizations, only 34% of Malaysian employees agreed with the statement: “Management can be trusted.” 32% disagreed with the statement while 34% were uncertain.

Take heed that personal integrity is an important determinant of one’s self-esteem and psychological well-being. As stated by Nathaniel Branden, we lose face in our own eyes when we behave in ways that conflict with our judgement of what is appropriate. Simply put, a breach of integrity wounds our self-esteem and erodes self-respect. In this regard, I am reminded of a German proverb: When wealth is lost, nothing is lost. When health is lost, something is lost. When character is lost, everything is lost.

Meaning of Integrity

Despite being a popular word and a virtue highly favoured by society, the term “integrity” is not widely understood. The word “integrity” is derived from the Latin word “integritas” meaning “wholeness”. The common dictionary definition of integrity is “quality of being honest and morally upright.” Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus—leading leadership gurus—define integrity as “a correspondence between word and deed.” Daniel Goleman defines integrity as “acting openly, honestly and consistently.” To my mind, a more comprehensive and apt definition of integrity is the congruence between one’s thoughts, feelings, values and words with action.

Major Elements of Integrity

The major elements of integrity are speaking the truth, practising what one preaches, honouring promises and commitments, not deceiving or manipulating others for personal gain, being forthright about own mistakes, and taking risks to defend just principles and ideals.

Importance of Integrity

Integrity is the cornerstone for building trust and credibility which are crucial for securing employee commitment. It is absolutely essential for winning the hearts and minds of subordinates and bringing out the best in them. Research by the *Center for Creative Leadership* shows that successful managers had strong integrity. In contrast, many of the derailed managers did not honour promises or betrayed the trust of others. Integrity is also absolutely essential to leadership; it is a primary determinant of whether people will perceive a leader to be trustworthy. In the words of Max DePree, “Integrity is the linchpin of leadership.” Indeed, research throughout the world (including Malaysia) has shown that integrity is the most admired trait of leaders.

Ten Tips on Maintaining Integrity

1. **Clarify your own core values.** Determine the core values that you choose to live your life and are willing to stand by them. Subsequently, translate them into a set of guiding principles. More importantly, conform to these principles in your daily behaviour and decision making.
2. **Be truthful.** People are generally more tolerant of learning something they “don’t want to hear” than finding out that someone lied to them.
3. **Honour your promises.** Honouring promises and commitments is vital for people to perceive you as being dependable or reliable. Never make promises that you don’t intend to keep. Similarly, never make decisions that you cannot support.
4. **Show consistency in behaviour.** Consistency in behaviour is crucial for others to trust you. In Peter Drucker’s words, “Effective leadership ... is not based on being clever; it is based primarily on being consistent.” Mistrust arises generally from not knowing what to expect.

5. **Practise open and honest communication.** Open and honest communication engenders confidence and trustworthiness. Fully disclose relevant information to parties involved, ensure decision-making criteria is overtly clear, explain the rationale for your decisions, and be forthright about problems.
6. **Demonstrate fairness and objectivity.** Be objective and fair in your dealings with others. Give credit where it's due. Make judgements strictly based upon facts.
7. **Take responsibility.** Admit mistakes or errors in judgement. Avoid blaming others for every problem.
8. **Share credit for successes.** Acknowledge other people's contributions. Remember that the greatest human craving is to be appreciated or being praised.
9. **Never violate confidences.** Maintain confidentiality. Resist the temptation to feel important by leaking secrets.
10. **Maintain loyalty.** Be loyal to your friends or followers. Never manipulate people for pursuing self-interest.