

# Power of Integrity



*Address integrity in training, behavior reinforcement, and leadership by example to achieve high “integrity quotients.”*

**M**ANY ORGANIZATIONS include “integrity” in their values and in their marketing communications to prospects and customers. Naturally, most people want to do business with people and organizations with integrity. So, explicitly claiming your organization has integrity seems useful for attracting customers, employees, and suppliers.

Declaring integrity has many impacts, mostly positive. The positive impacts include setting expectations for behavior and communicating a desirable image. Yet, it is difficult to remain in a state of integrity because of the many people and processes involved. Every breach of integrity—and there are many each day—hurts the level of trust and the self-esteem among employees, not to mention damaging relationships with customers and suppliers.

Integrity has many meanings: living one’s word, delivering on promises, alignment of beliefs and actions, wholeness, honesty, sincerity, and authenticity. There are hundreds of opportunities in anyone’s workday where a break in integrity can occur. For example, the company misses a delivery commitment to a customer or supplier; someone arrives late to a meeting; a salesperson exaggerates the company’s experience; a sales proposal includes incorrect data; managers don’t conduct performance reviews; a worker explains a mistake in a way that makes him or her appear blameless.

You might argue that some of these examples are not breaches of integrity, but the results of mistakes. I agree, but they all represent broken commitments or promises. Eliminating these breaks yields a higher level of integrity.

Breaks in integrity by leaders have very high negative impact. People develop trust in others based on their actions more than their words. Furthermore, employees tend to emulate their leaders’ behavior or that of people who appear to be valued. Breaks in integrity that go unacknowledged also cause damage because they breed more disdain and mistrust. Companies that publicly acknowledge product safety problems and take positive actions to correct them fare better in regaining market share after the incidents than companies that try to cover up problems.



If you say your organization has integrity or you are people of integrity, you must live up to your word with extraordinary effort—or the loss of trust will be even greater than if you never claimed integrity at all. Leaders who value integrity and publicly declare it must understand the meaning of integrity; recognize integrity breakdowns when they occur; admit when they break integrity; apologize for the impact on others; provide processes and training that assure promises to customers, employees, and suppliers can be met; continually reinforce the value of integrity; and reward behavior that shows integrity.

Don’t assume everyone understands the meaning of integrity. Your interpretation of integrity, aligned with your values and mission, needs to be made explicit.

Stephen Covey talks about “emotional bank accounts” wherein our actions make either deposits or withdrawals to our own or others’ accounts.

“If you make and keep promises, you build a reserve of trust.”

I once worked for a CEO who said he would help or make time to talk with anyone who asked. He kept his word almost perfectly over seven years. What a wonderful role model he was, and what a refreshing culture his behavior created because employees emulated him.

Apology is a powerful way to repair breaks in integrity and regain trust—if it is not overused. A colleague of mine was chronically late to meetings. He apologized almost every time, but ultimately his apologies were received with cynicism.

Another way that people can maintain integrity is to enlist support from team members. Any leader who is committed to living his values might ask his management team to “call him on it” every time he errs. All that’s needed is a code word or a simple “You’re doing it again.” It takes someone who can set aside the need to be “right” to do that. Effective leaders ask for help from those around them and apologize when appropriate.

In a high-trust environment, employees, customers, and suppliers genuinely want to be part of the organization and eagerly refer others as potential employees and customers. Warren Bennis notes: “Integrity is the basis of trust, which is not as much an ingredient of leadership as it is a product. It is the one quality that cannot be acquired, but must be earned. It is given by co-workers and followers; without it, the leader can’t function.”

The intentional pursuit of integrity satisfies a basic human need for trust in relationships and breeds higher employee and customer loyalty, which lead to improved profitability.

You can measure your company’s “integrity quotient” by delineating all promises or agreements and measuring the degree to which they are kept with customers, employees, and suppliers. Take preventive steps to assure products and services fulfill their promises. Regularly audit product and service performance relative to the promises made in marketing materials and sales presentations, and use the assessment to focus improvement efforts to achieve closer alignment. Measurement will help you achieve a higher level of integrity. **EE**

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*Excellence in Action: Regularly assess stakeholders’ perceptions of how well your organization lives its mission and values.*