



Integrity

By Dr. Wayne Applewhite and a special thank you to

Colonel Kathryn Van Der Linden, USAF, MSC, for her edits and collaborative thoughts

We have all heard *that* word before....

I will not take up your time listing all the favorite quotes or clichés that have ever been written about *integrity*; if you want those, you can easily find them online or at your local bookstore or library. No, today, I plan to utilize another approach.

Let's take a moment and view integrity from a perspective of what it is *not*.

Integrity is not about getting things done. It is not about pleasing everyone. It is not about looking good in front of your peers or your bosses. It is not about the perfect presentation. It is not about good news or bad news. It is not about easy, hard or complex. It is neither about the short term nor the long term. It is also not about how well you performed in the last calendar year. And it most certainly is not about the policies, regulations, or the people around you.

“Then what is it about?” you ask? Great question; glad you asked! Integrity is simply about *you*. That's it. It is that easy and that simple. Integrity is all about *you*!

When you look in the mirror, are you proud of who looks back at you? When you look deep within yourself, do you like what you see? After you have interacted with someone on the job, can it be said that you were true to your character? True to the person you have professed yourself to be through verbal and nonverbal communication? True for what you stand for?

Are your actions consistent? Are your reactions consistent? When others look at you, do they see the same person today they saw six months earlier? Do those who work around you trust you? How do you know they trust you? More importantly, do you care?

Integrity must be the whole person. Restated, integrity must be the “holistic” personal character trait that is unyielding inside of you. It is the underlying foundation of who we are as a person. If the answer to a situation's question is “no,” then you offer that *no* with an appropriate explanation, and never change your answer to “maybe” just because you speak to someone else on the same issue. Most assuredly, if future changes in the same situation present a different

picture, then the answer could change to “yes,” but for now—all facts remaining constant— “no” is The Right Answer regardless of a change in the message’s receiver. Conversely, having accomplished all of your due diligence, if you find the answer to be yes, then one fights for that yes with the same vigor no matter the audience – again, all facts remaining constant.

I suggested that integrity was not about good news or bad news; it is only about the *news*, good and bad. Likewise, it is about the short-term, medium-term and the long-term mutual benefit. It is about the value you bring to the organization today, not what you might have accomplished over the years. If you have been, and are, consistent, that is what is most important. Policies, regulations and rules can and will change! Those changes come from people with the integrity to say change is required. These people then offer why and how to affect change. Sadly, some have lost their integrity to greed, position, the need for status, and to be Number One. Many of those individuals now find themselves incarcerated, fired, demoted, ousted from office, and wondering “what happened?”, not to mention where they’re to go from their fallen state. Co-workers are left to speculate where and why those individuals went wrong. My guess? It happened over time. The individuals who put themselves above doing The Right Thing did not perform a “gut-check” when they had the first inclination they were not doing what their inner selves knew to be The Right Thing.

My mom was the best teacher on integrity I ever had, and she offered many examples. No matter how old I became, no matter how many college degrees I earned, and no matter how high I rose in any organization, my mom would chastise me if I did not eat my vegetables. Conversely, she would always find the time to congratulate me when I was successful; it did not matter to her the enormity of the event, the congratulations were always the same; *heartfelt*. When my path occasionally became difficult, she would raise her head to see if I was still in the “fight,” then check to see whether I stood my ground no matter the outcome. She always told me to do my best, and if someone else’s best was better than mine, then so be it. “Learn from that [experience]” she would say, “and then reenter the ‘fight’ next time with new and supportive information, for or against.”

The values my mother instilled taught me that if the boss did not like my answer, I needed to go back and do more homework. If the answer remained the same, I should give my boss the answer along with more information and intelligence, because *that was my job*. My job did not include being a “yes man” just to make it easier to deliver a difficult message.

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary gives these definitions of “integrity”:

- 1: firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values : [INCORRUPTIBILITY](#)
- 2: an unimpaired condition : [SOUNDNESS](#)
- 3: the [quality](#) or state of being complete or undivided : [COMPLETENESS](#)

synonyms see [HONESTY](#)

When one reads these definitions, more questions may arise: what are “morals,” and where were they learned; and, what is meant by “quality?” Those are discussions for another day.

As I look in the mirror, and as I understand my interpretation of the word *integrity* and its synonym *honesty*, I perform my own personal gut-check: “Would my mom be proud of the person I see looking back at me?”

*Dr. Applewhite is a co-founder of the leadership development firm, **Just Leadership, LLC.**, and an Adjunct Professor for Boston University. Please visit his website: www.justleadership.net. If you have a comment or question, you can also drop him a line: wayne@justleadership.net. – Thank you!*