

Why Integrity Matters

Craig P. Dunn (corresponding author)
Department of Management
Western Washington University
516 High Street
Bellingham, WA 98225-9075
360-650-2593
craig.dunn@wwu.edu

International Association for Business and Society 2007

Why Leader Integrity Matters

Business practitioners have a long history of advising leadership students and scholars that leader integrity—“the wholeness, intactness or purity of a thing” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)—is of central importance to effective leadership. For example, George’s (2003) book, Authentic Leadership, calls for business to elevate leaders who are “authentic leaders, people of the highest integrity, committed to building enduring organizations...[w]e need leaders who have a deep sense of purpose and are true to their core values” (p. 5). Similarly, in The Leadership Challenge Kouzes and Posner (2002) report surveys of over 75,000 people around the globe that ask the question: What do you most look for and admire in a leader? Leader honesty, which the authors align with integrity, was selected more often than any other leadership characteristic.

However, many of these prescriptions regarding the importance of integrity appear to accept the value of integrity without discussing *why* it is so important. Integrity is asserted to be important to leadership simply because its value appears obvious and intuitive. Missing are discussions and explanations of why leader integrity is so important or, in our terms, why leader integrity “matters.”

Purpose of this Research

We are proposing a discussion session on the question of why leader integrity matters. While we would serve little purpose in advising practitioners that leader integrity *does* matter, we may serve by advising practitioners as to *why* leader integrity matters.

Our objective is to offer two detailed perspectives as to why leader integrity matters. The first perspective is a philosophical one grounded in the intrinsic value of leader integrity. In this regard, in his writing about moral duty Immanuel Kant eventually arrived at certain ‘categorical

imperatives,' or moral mandates. Among this very short list is the following: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end." Extending Kant's logic from treatment of persons to the concept of integrity nets some interesting inferences. Although leader integrity may well lead to 'good' organizational outcomes, such 'good' cannot fully justify the commitment to leader integrity. On Kant's view—and more importantly in the view of Aristotle before him and Bennett and others since—integrity has 'value' in and of itself. As it relates to character, the notion of integrity takes several meanings, among them (i) integrity as the integration of self; (ii) integrity as maintenance of identity; (iii) integrity as standing for something; (iv) integrity as moral purpose; and (v) integrity as a virtue" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

The second perspective is an instrumental one that describes why leader integrity matters in terms of its positive influence upon key variables driving follower performance. Such consequentialist arguments, which seek justification for actions in the outcomes they attain, are on Kant's logic merely 'hypothetical imperatives.' Utilitarians, of course, have no difficulty with this logic, as all behaviors are seen to be morally justified on the basis of the 'good' outcomes associated with alternative courses of action.

Given this second perspective integrity matters because of its positive effect(s) upon the leadership process as well as the positive organizational outcomes it achieves. Utilizing consequentialist reasoning we propose a model in which perceptions of leader integrity affect an array of follower outcomes through its effects on how followers decide to follow. We look at the information needs of followers as they decide whether to follow a leader. We propose that perceptions of leader integrity offer information that would help followers decide to follow even

in the absence of specific information about a leader's plans and/or competencies. Our focus herein is on how the information contained in a judgment that a leader has integrity will likely affect the followers' decision to follow, depth of commitment in following, and subsequent performance.

We additionally explore mechanisms explaining the variety of ways in which followers develop perceptions of leader integrity. We discuss how mechanisms that aid in the development of reputations—such as word-of-mouth, direct observation, and critical incidents—can enhance or reduce perceptions of integrity, and how these sources of information can also affect followers' decision to follow in the first instance.

Conclusion

Our interest is not to set one perspective up as more important or useful than the other. Instead, we maintain that a thoroughgoing examination of why leader integrity is fundamental to leadership should include both instrumental and intrinsic perspectives. In this way we unite the philosophical tradition of virtue theory with the more contemporary findings of organizational behavior theorists. With both these perspectives made plain, we are in a better position to advise practitioners not only that integrity matters, but why it matters.

References

Aristotle (Ross, W.D.: translator). Nicomachean Ethics [On-line]. Available: <http://www.virtuescience.com/nicomachean-ethics.html>

Bennett, William J. (ed.: 1993). The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories, New York: Simon and Schuster.

George, W. (2003). Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value, New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Kouzes, J. M. & Posner, B. Z. (2002). The Leadership Challenge (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

MacIntyre, Alasdair (1984). After Virtue (2nd ed.). Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Zalta, Edward N. (ed.) (2006). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [On-line]. Available: <http://plato.stanford.edu/>.