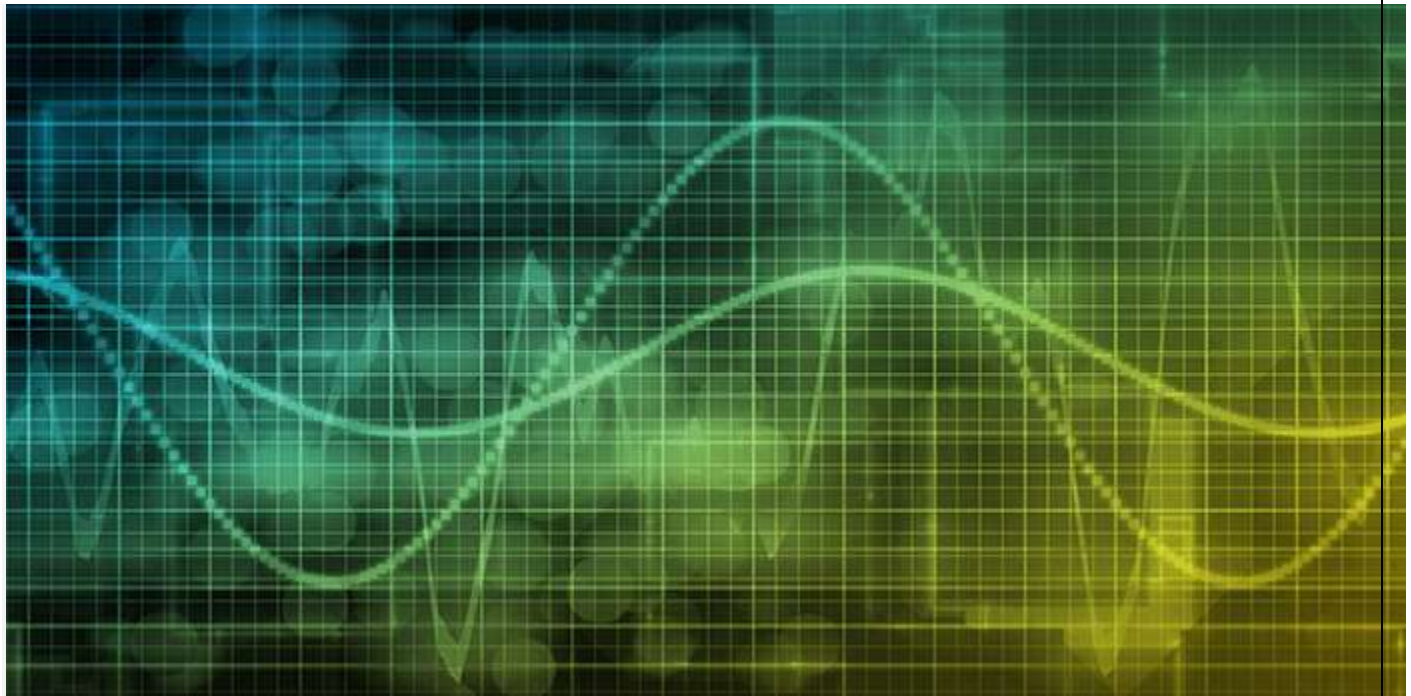


Why Integrity Remains One of the Top Leadership Attributes

• By Terri Williams



*"The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office."
-Dwight D. Eisenhower*

A lot has changed since Eisenhower marched first into war and then into the White House. But time has not diminished the importance of integrity as a leadership trait.

According to a [survey by Robert Half Management Resources](#), both employees and C-suite leaders place a high premium on integrity among executives. In a survey of over 1,000 office employees and more than 2,200 chief financial officers, respondents were allowed to choose up to 3 responses to the question:

Which of these are the most important attributes in a corporate leader?

Why is integrity such an important leadership trait?

While both employees and CFOs rated integrity as the most essential leadership trait, a greater percentage of employees considered it the top quality in an executive. Such results were no surprise to Tim Hird, executive director of the firm that ran the survey. "People want to work for those who are ethical," he explained. "They know that if their leader acts with integrity, that leader will treat them right and do what's best for the business."

In fact, Hird says that leaders with integrity actually strengthen the business. "Companies with strong, ethical management teams enhance their ability to attract investors, customers and talented professionals," explains Hird, adding that ethical behavior starts at the top and allows companies to create a culture that values integrity.

So leaders need to realize that their words, actions, decisions, and methodologies help to create the company's true values and its culture. To help understand how leaders shape organizational behavior, we reached out to David M. Long, assistant professor of Organizational Behavior at the Mason School of Business at the College of William & Mary. According to Long, there are just three key pillars of a leader's trustworthiness - **and integrity is one of the three**. "Followers determine how trustworthy a leader is based on their ability, their benevolence and their integrity," he claims. "Followers are willing to be vulnerable in a good way to leaders they trust, and are more inclined to be satisfied with and committed to them."

The link between integrity and trust cannot be overestimated in the leader-employee relationship. At the end of the day, Long says executive leaders are judged on character and competence. "Character includes integrity and signals if the leader is friend or foe."

Long agrees with Hird that when employees believe their leader has integrity, they associate this trait with kindness and having good intentions as opposed to selfish motives. "Competence then signals if the leader has the ability to act on their character," he says. "A leader who has integrity and competence is a very valuable asset to organizations, and over time tends to be more effective than a leader who lacks these two traits."

Beyond the buzzwords

Most leaders and companies profess to “value integrity”. But they may not all understand or agree on the definition of this popular term. Christopher Bauer, PhD, a fraud specialist, and author of “Better Ethics NOW: How to Avoid the Ethics Disaster You Never Saw Coming,” tells The Economist Careers Network this is a discussion that must take place at every leadership level.

“Everyone is wildly ‘pro-integrity,’ but ask them what integrity actually means and they can rarely tell you, let alone translate their definition into specific behavioral expectations.” As a result, Bauer says that even well-intentioned organizations are just echoing empty phrases if there are no detailed explanations regarding expected and acceptable behavior.

Why leaders must lead

When executive leaders determine what integrity looks like in their organization, they need to emphasize and highlight it at every turn. Bauer says the “tone at the top” is critical. “Leaders need to model and then actively, visibly, reinforce integrity for everyone in the organization – and this is true for executive leaders and leaders at every level of the organization.” Regardless of job description or title, Bauer says every leader must be responsible for modeling integrity.

However, since executive leaders are the most visible members of the organization, and since they have the potential to cause the most reputational damage, Bauer says it’s crucial for them to support compliance, accountability and ethical behavior. He concludes, “If they are modeling behavior that lacks integrity, what message is that sending employees about what is acceptable behavior?”

Practical ways leaders can develop/display integrity

Hird and Robert Half Management Resources list five ways that leaders can develop and display integrity.

1. It should go without saying but bears repeating: Be honest, and treat people well. Don’t exaggerate successes, and be quick to praise others’ contributions.

2. Leaders also need to hold themselves accountable not just to their superiors but also to their peers and staff. Similarly, they must treat everyone fairly, regardless of a person's standing in the organization.
3. Consider conducting a self-audit. Start by thinking about others you admire. What makes them admirable? Which of their attributes do you want to emulate, and how successful are your efforts to do so? If you find you're lacking in an area, try to determine why.
4. Find out how others view you. It's one thing to ponder how we think we're perceived, but quite another to know for sure. Talk to your manager, employees, and network contacts outside of the company about what you do well and what you can do better.
5. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable with your staff. If you make a mistake, say so and do all you can to fix it. Your employees don't expect you to be perfect, and you can alienate them if you are unable to admit fault when things go wrong.

--

*Terri Williams is a freelance writer who covers leadership topics for **The Economist Careers Network**.*

Key Career Strategies

Push: (employee showing)

- Hard and smart working habits
- Knowledge of the technical or functional domain
- Ambition, drive, loyalty, integrity
- Soft skills
- Ability to develop social networks – who do you know?

Pull: (management looking for)

- Professional presence, etiquette,
- Value in values : integrity, social competencies, empathy (you will be remembered for how you make people feel and how you will represent your company)
- Instincts – making good decisions
- Efficiency and effectiveness
- Comfort around you – humor, charisma, fit
- Reputation - who knows you and for what you are known?

