

# **Position Paper**

A cautionary tale about integrity  
From a value to a competency

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## A cautionary tale about integrity From a value to a competency

### *Introduction*

Before we begin our discussion about integrity in the workplace, let's start with a few basic definitions.

INTEGRITY is about adherence to a moral code or to ethical principles. It's about a person's strength of character in terms of morality and honesty in the face of adversity or hardship. One is said to have integrity when his or her actions and beliefs are based on a set of values, and when tested, are displayed faithfully through appropriate behaviors and attitudes. Although some values may be transformed over time, their consistent implementation into everyday actions in a variety of settings with different people determines one's true level of integrity.

In a business setting, integrity is about displaying full, unwavering truthfulness with regard to what we say and do in a competitive environment. Some business settings are not so predisposed to promote and reinforce behaviors that are linked to integrity. Politically contaminated work environments invariably exclude from their mainstream those who don't "play the game". Those difficult workplaces often discourage employees to be forthright, candid or clear speaking. This means first and foremost that preserving clarity about what we know about people isn't encouraged, thus allowing people to demean or obscure reality of what people think and how they behave. Without that clarity, a sharp uncompromising comprehension about what is actually happening within the walls of an organization, will sooner or later compromise its mission and overall performance.

Without that clarity, a sharp grasp of what is actually right and wrong, will sooner or later compromise the organization's survival.

But is integrity any different from honesty? Yes and No. Both have to do with truthfulness. However our level of integrity is tested and determined by how honest we are in difficult situations: where the right answer requires courage and a clear understanding of what's ethical. When the right decision somehow hurts, one way or the other.

At this time we can safely say that the work place is replete with those opportunities to do the right thing or not.

Displaying our integrity also involves an acute awareness of our errors and weaknesses. In that light, we are required to generate the strength of character to take responsibility for our actions. Finally integrity means that we do not compromise what we believe to be true or settle for less, for the sake of a gain or an advantage.

What is really exceptional about being honest and true to one's self, is that too few leaders

in the workplace actually believe the act of being truthful as a viable management strategy to:

1. Solve problems
2. Help people
3. Make money
4. Develop stockholder confidence and
5. Build strong corporate reputations

This cautionary tale about people's integrity (and deceitfulness) presents a few suggestions on how to deal with people who lack integrity and practice deception as a matter of course. I will also make the case for integrity as a competency because simply put, it isn't a contemporary value any longer.

When dealing with deceitful individuals, I will suggest taking the high road because, as I see it, it's the only way for honest people to prevail. Liars and manipulators have, overtime developed a better than average competency in the use of deception, manipulation and treachery, to achieve their goals or to cloak themselves from being seen for what they truly are.

To be more exact, when we find ourselves in a struggle with dishonest individuals, we should stick to basics: say what you know to be true. That's because we don't always have the experience or the competencies to do battle, to confront, or to be sharp and witty when facing deceitful people. Nor can we pretend to be strategic and smart when facing devious adversaries, so stick to the truth.

Those goaded into fighting deception with their so-called smart strategies rarely succeed simply because "smart" doesn't ever replace a forthright approach and an honest message. Straightforward folks confronted with untrustworthy and dishonest people should use their own strengths which should include intelligence, professionalism, clarity, sincerity and courage. If one does not yet master those strengths, they should seek help, or run away.

### ***A cautionary tale***

A few years ago, I was having lunch in a charming outdoor café with the HR Vice-President of a large and successful organization. That organization was itself part of a holding company. I was accompanied by a young corporate HR support specialist from the holding company.

The topic was succession planning. The holding company was insistent that all of its entities start a concentrated effort to identify management potential. My client, a senior HR corporate manager responsible for the "Top 200" was offering my services as a consultant to all operational units. He wanted to fast track the development of their resources' development and the acquisition or retention of new and rare competencies. He believed that my succession planning process would help. I had originally perfected this process a few years back, using a visually strategic instrument for one of the top legal institution of my country.

The VP was explaining to us that he (and his team) had already developed a succession plan but, he would nevertheless accept any input if it could enhance his own program. We were keen to take a look at what he had developed so far and again the VP was kind enough to offer us total access to his material: succession lists and the related process documentation. We were to take those documents with us for further study -insofar as we did not make any copies. He wanted to make sure that critical information he had developed over the years would be held in strict confidence and that he could count on us for that.

The HR support specialist and I both promised him that no copies would be made and once we were done with the documents, they would be destroyed or returned to him. We both thought that he believed us and we shook on it.

About 3 minutes away from the cafe, having parted with the VP, the young HR support specialist turned to me and asked me quite simply if she could have a copy made of those documents. We were not too far from her office and she thought it could be done quickly. We were scheduled to meet again later that week to discuss the next steps involved and she wished to study the succession lists at her own leisure before we met again. At first I thought she was kidding because she seemed so earnest to keep her word to the VP. To my surprise she wasn't.

Clearly annoyed, I refused and called her behavior unacceptable. From her perspective, I must have appeared to be highly judgmental, which of course I was, and that was the beginning of my problems with this person.

Later, having revisited that event and the role I played in it, I came to the conclusion that her rage toward me was of my own making. Although I could have let it pass and offered her to take the original documents right there and then, I decided instead to confront her. I believed then that an adult should know what's right and what's wrong. I have since then begun to believe a different story.

And so I came to the unpleasant conclusion that either I was dealing with a deceitful individual or worst, someone incompetent in understanding and displaying his or her integrity in the work place: a person that doesn't understand what integrity means, a person who couldn't tell the difference between right and wrong.

As I said, a few months later I realized that I was in fact dealing with a person wholly lacking in integrity. To make things worse for me as a consultant, I realized that she had been found out and exposed as a liar. I was quickly becoming a liability for her. Soon after this incident, my client was asking me if I was having any problems with my work, with the young HR support specialist in particular, because she was complaining about me and was questioning the necessity of having me around for this or any other assignment.

Let's be clear about dishonest persons: they will resent being exposed and they will go to any length to hide their true nature. They will fight back with everything they have at their disposal when exposed. They will do so by making sure that "the other" appears to be the "bad guy". They will ensure you are discredited. This is done fairly simply and quickly: an accusation of wrongdoing or professional fault will cause people to start doubting you. Let's keep in mind their cunning, their intelligence and their manipulative skills. They will act instinctively and blatantly without any sign of remorse.

## ***A bigger problem than expected!***

I soon realized through my coaching practice that many individuals displayed similar issues related to integrity. As I stated earlier, some apparently didn't have a clue about what is acceptable and what isn't in a business environment. Their dealings with colleagues, the way they solve problems, their approach to communicate to employees or their handling of customers' complaints were convoluted at best. Some talked openly about how they had handled problems and were then mystified when their colleagues' responded aggressively to them.

Most of their decisions were clearly inappropriate and showed a significant lack of judgment. I became exposed to a set of beliefs based on a naïve understanding of life... at work. In most cases, they simply didn't know what to do when faced with a difficult decision involving an ethical dilemma. "What am I supposed to do?" they asked. They evolved with beliefs that are more akin to TV soap operas and, to make things worst, their understanding of life was at best, juvenile.

Rather than adhere to solid ethical principles or moral values found in some adults, parents, teachers...many simply modeled themselves on what was accessible.

As a result, I soon became more aware that for a great many, displaying ethical behavior wasn't important. Their dysfunction was about immaturity, refusing (or unable) to become an adult and refusing (or unable) to discard youthful beliefs.

As for my young HR support specialist, I'm afraid that she was far too lucid, far too experienced and set in her ways to be "fixed". Her case wasn't about a learning dysfunction, but rather a conscious choice to get what she could, regardless of its ethical nature... and then get away with it! It seems to me that I was witnessing the emergence of a new value: *Getting away with it*.

## ***Why do we need to impart integrity?***

Simply put, for many years now, I have been, encountering an important number of people who have come to the work place having not yet achieved adulthood. Because they haven't developed or acquired the values we would like to see in young adults such as integrity, honesty, courage, resolve and judgment, they will use, as a moral compass, whatever they have at their disposal. They will learn about "What's in it for me" and "Can I get away with this?" They have acquired those values at school, at work, on TV, on the radio, on the Internet, in the popular Press, from friends, parents and teachers who are themselves still trapped at a pre-adult phase.

I will not discuss the relationship between integrity and the role parents, teachers, religious and national leaders' are playing in this quagmire. That should be the subject of another paper altogether if I had the courage to tackle that issue. Let's put that off until tomorrow: how we can change the world! For now, let's just focus on the issue at hand: integrity as a competency in the work place.

## ***Competency training: Integrity***

So we now come to the crux of the matter: should business leaders take on the responsibility of requiring integrity as a skill for employment and of displaying integrity as a competency?

We know that a number of competencies are required for a person to successfully perform on a specific job. But, in our “value anemic” context, what we understand as integrity needs to be understood as a skill rather than a value, a competency to be acquired at work rather than a value developed before joining the workforce.

This has become necessary because one, it’s no longer a value we can count on to be generated and integrated at home and school and two, if we don’t teach it, who will?

If we don’t, what kind of trouble are we setting ourselves up for? Customers and shareholders have already reacted zealously when organizations that did not steer their ship on a clear ethical course were exposed.

Organizations have vanished from the business landscape within a few months after scandals erupted in the media.

Prosecutors have also acted with the weight the law: many executives have wound up in jail for failing to adhere to legal or honest business practices. Others were found guilty and were sentenced to jail for failing to insure adherence to legal or honest business practices from employees and management alike. And although governance practices were in place, senior managers nevertheless were incapable of stopping people determined to do the unacceptable.

Ironically, even if our own brand of integrity is somewhat flexible or elastic, most of us will not take well to unethical or dishonest people and their dealings with us, if they impact us negatively. That’s how it works!

And as a result of using integrity slogans for political or corporate agendas, this value has been downgraded to wishful thinking, a line on the corporate credo billboard, an empty commitment to citizens, customers, shareholders or employees. People must then understand and integrate this attribute of integrity elsewhere: either through training, religion or a leader’ exemplary behavior.

More generally, the integrity competency should be understood and used to insure that organizations and their members do not “accidentally” veer off the straight and narrow and self-destruct. Remember the troubles at Adelphia, Arthur Andersen, Barings Bank, Enron, Madoff, Martha Stewart, National Australia Bank, Parmalat, Société Générale, S&L’s, Subprime Morgages, Tyco Corp... to name a few of the most notorious cases.

Most organizations, sooner or later, have dealt with some form of an integrity dysfunction. However, their failure to deal effectively with rampant dishonest behavior in the work place has often caused irreparable damage. Their demise generated hardship for many who had planned a career or worst, a well deserved retirement. This goes beyond scandal, outrage or dishonor. It’s about criminal behavior. It’s also about trust: we all need to do business and to make our society function.

### ***Joining the work force***

Young people entering the work force are also at risk: They will join other men and women who have already displayed poor ethical and moral decisions, where the do's and don'ts are not clearly stated.

Leaders assume that people know right from wrong from their first day at work.

Then again, fearing that ethical behavior might put them at risk for next year's bonuses, they fail to specify what the acceptable behaviors are indeed about and what actions will be punished.

Simply put, integrity in people is taken for granted or simply ignored, if the performance is there. In many work environments, integrity as a business value is ridiculed as provincial and naïve.

The proverbial "blind leading the blind" picture comes to mind when the quick minded and streetwise become the leaders of tomorrow.

I believe our management ranks are overflowing with ethically rudderless people. There's not always malice involved here, sometimes it's just plain ignorance. Those displaying too much integrity are seen as too rigid and are criticized for it.

I'm asked if those people with integrity will play ball. There's something horribly wrong with that question; unfortunately, the one asking doesn't have a clue what's wrong! In this context, let me suggest a few questions you can use to assess your own work environment and your integrity IQ:

Do people around me take responsibility for their actions?

Do my colleagues talk about the real issues at meetings?

How many times do my colleagues have to lie in any given day?

What do my colleagues really believe in?

How do my colleagues feel about telling the truth?

Answer those questions for others and for yourself, and evaluate the place integrity plays in your organization: its IQ. Imagine then, if just for a moment, what a dishonest, intelligent and manipulative individual could do in your work environment if it were populated and led by rudderless individuals.

### ***From value to competency***

First let's define value. The debate between nature and nurture is still on when we talk values. Regardless, there is general agreement that a value (ideals, moral principles, societal standards, or ethics) is developed through our early experiences at home with family members and with other people responsible for our education. We know that our values can change over time, in particular when we go through different life changing phases (such as infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age). Values can also change abruptly when we experience a significant event, either wonderful or terrifying, causing dysfunction or personal growth.

Values help us to be functional and consistent in a bewildering world. While making choices everyday, our values guide us in our decisions by helping us quickly assess which options are socially acceptable from those frowned upon. They provide instant bearings as to what is right and what is wrong. They also help us compare our choices to those we have made in the past. They help us understand our own sense of history, of self-worth and reputation.

Values will also help us see clearly, remember more honestly what we have done and accomplished throughout our life. Although many values generated early in life can be resistant to change, we allow for subtle adjustments as we change the social or political environments we live in.

While most modern organizations openly display their corporate values as part of their brand or corporate identity, few act on them, assess their level of compliance or have gone to the trouble of identifying the behaviors required to comply with them. Unfortunately, because values are acquired through reinforcement, conditioning and interpersonal experience, any significant failure in this learning process will slow one's maturation into adulthood.

That said, I believe integrity, as a value, has been transformed over the last 35 years through social upheavals, profound economic changes, competition, globalization and technology. The free or low cost access to consumer products and information, has provided free title to otherwise expensive products. Free downloading of music, films and information has shaped a culture of entitlement. It's now OK to take something because it's belongs to no one.

Families and organizations are struggling to understand a culture that believes that everything is OK if you can get away with it. Laws and social practices associated with respect and civility are fading away.

We are encouraging people's sense of entitlement and, as a result, the notion of integrity, respect of others and plain decency are being replaced with other values. Ironically, those feeding the sense of entitlement in their customers will probably be the first to feel these people's disloyalty and contempt. I truly believe that "What goes around comes around".

This amazing effect on our value system is now surfacing in the marketplace, in our schools and in the workplace.

Still, some will say, in defense of their contemporaries' and children's dishonest behavior, that integrity is still a strong value. They will declare it without batting an eye. It's more a question of how the value is demonstrated, they say!

They refuse to hypothetically examine the possibility that integrity is at risk. The prospect that integrity is a dying value is so unbearable, they will explain it by saying the market has to adapt to people's behavior. It's the market's fault: that's why people download illegally. Don't blame the kids: you have a bad and outdated business model.

Those behaviors you are talking about André, that's not dishonest. Those poor people really don't understand that what they are doing is stealing! And it's really not! Forget the author's right to get payment for their work. That's over and done with. The world is changing.

Adding insult to injury, they accuse the market place of keeping inefficient business models

alive by believing that people should be paid for the work they do and offenders prosecuted.

As far as I can see, companies are either indifferent to these value changes or are terrified to accept their existence and implications.

### ***Dealing with dishonest people***

Honest and dishonest people populate the world because we let them and because we are free to do good or not. It's in our nature.

To be able to identify dishonest people and be in a position to succeed in the workplace in spite of them, we must first understand them intimately.

Liars revel in deceit. They love it and enjoy what they are doing as long as their game stays hidden. However when we lie, we do so to ourselves first and then proceed to lie to others. Consequently when liars do it often enough, they get good at it and become desensitized to the little voice in their heads saying they are doing harm to real people and to themselves. When we lie as a matter of course, we begin to believe that life is a game where a lie is just another tool to get things done. We also start believing our own words and get offended when confronted with the truth.

Deceivers are also an arrogant bunch: they believe they can get away with it! They work with the belief that the rest of us are too stupid or cowardly to do anything about their machinations and manipulations: that's called contempt.

They are pure narcissists: they love who they have become, even though another part of them is conscious of the scam behind this feeling. They seek pleasure in their treachery while never achieving it, or feeling any sense of completion, even though there's always someone to "screw" with.

Liars suffer from a real mental sickness: a psychological personality disorder called Narcissism. Once the disorder has taken hold on someone, they will exaggerate their results of their actions. And then, when confronted with the truth, liars have ability to shift the focus from themselves and blame others.

Here are persons that have learned to be "bent". They protect themselves by bending the truth, by disguising their agenda with some of the truth and introducing a little of their own invention into the fray.

Dishonest people like to spin information, questions and advice to make themselves useful while others look foolish or incompetent. They will always find what's wrong with another's suggestions or ideas. They will criticize others with small patronizing suggestions. They will use every opportunity to offer their help while making sure that people know that it's really a hopeless case.

They will not take a clear stand on anything that may be challenged. They will not defend someone unless it makes them look good. They do not take risks unless there is no real risk involved. They may be invisible to most of their colleagues and say nothing worth remembering. They will always blame others for their errors. However when exposed for what they are doing, they will act offended, complain about being injured and accuse of others of duplicity. If confronted they will morph into victims. Finally they will make us believe

that we have erred, that it's our mistake.

Their duplicity is nothing less than behaviors and values that change according to different contexts. They commit themselves in one context and, later, ignore it and act contrary to that commitment.

They do damage. Let me repeat that to managers and leaders who do not act when faced with dishonest people: they do damage.

In a corporate culture where employees make commitments they don't intend to keep, and where bad behavior is ignored instead of corrected, damage to people will occur like a body infected by cancer, it is insidious...

Our only real protection against them is to struggle to be straightforward and behave accordingly. In the short term, this behavior may create a difficult context for us but in the long run and in most cases, our direct and consistent approach towards lies and falsehoods generate a strong reputation for being trustworthy and responsible.

### ***The inner workings of a lie***

First off, let's not mistake our everyday white lies we generate with pleasure with the subject of this paper: The immature adult or the truly dishonest.

The size of the fish we caught last summer, the length of our golf shot, the number of clients a consultant might have at any given time, the way a dress fits on a friend or wife... doesn't count as dishonest, malicious behavior. Sometimes little white lies are just that: exaggerations to embellish a story, lighten a mood, or render a tale more memorable or to catch a smile from a tired friend in need of a break.

There is however a second level of lies which can lead to more serious deceitful behavior if not checked early. They include cheating at college exams, adding fictitious elements on a resume... illegally downloading music and film on the Internet, shoplifting...

We should also understand that lying can have a positive use in society: Saying "I'm too tired today honey" instead of "I don't want to be near you now", can be an acceptable, even a desirable behavior if it doesn't hide anything more serious than a passing mood.

What we are concerned with in this article is the lie as a tool to cover up errors and suppress the truth. However, most of us prefer to believe that, as a society, we are fundamentally honest, compassionate and courageous. I believe that we lie every day, some continuously ...

In essence deceivers lie to get what they want, to hurt someone, to protect and promote themselves.

Liars also need us to trust them when lying. The victim in this game must accept the liar as a truthful person. For a lie to be successful, it must be believed by the victim. It will come out as a favor grudgingly offered as if it was upsetting to the liar. Finally I have always been stunned by the amount of details incorporated into a story that has no truth whatsoever. It's a brilliant way to provide the victim with the reasons to believe the lie. Unfortunately, some want the lie as much as the liar! That's another issue.

## ***What can we do to protect ourselves from dishonest people?***

So what can we do to protect ourselves and our organizations from dishonest people?

### ***1. Expose the lie***

I would like to be clear about dishonest people and how we should handle them: they fear being exposed above anything else. I have *most of the time* confronted liars with their own words: “You said this and said that... and I don’t believe it, it’s not true, your statements are not consistent with the facts...”

I wouldn’t call them liars to their face unless I wanted to finish them off with a fatal blow. If we are not prepared to do battle and live with the possible consequences, we should then simply question their words instead of confronting them personally, or better yet, leave the room.

I also said that I confronted liars *most of the time*. That’s because, on a few occasions, the liar carried a big stick and could wield it with impunity. So in the name of self-preservation, I kept my mouth shut, I didn’t feel good about it, but who said that life was fair!

### ***2. Get a reliable witness***

If you must confront a dishonest person, have a witness present to be sure that your words are not twisted around later.

In a recent harassment investigation where I was assigned to manage the process for a governmental institution, I had decided to hire a note taker. She would be responsible to write down word for word what was said during the interviews. This was an unusual measure, given past practices and local customs. The stated reason for this measure was accuracy. Everyone involved in that process accepted the explanation at face value. But as far as I was concerned, the note taker was more a symbol to ensure truthfulness than accuracy. I also wanted to make sure that sooner or later, people interviewed would keep in mind that, whatever was said, it could not be denied at a later date. It wasn’t just my word against theirs! In this instance, I interviewed over 20 people. Nine of those interviewed asked to be re-interviewed because they had either forgotten important information or did not tell the whole story.

I am totally convinced that a witness can have a very sobering and significant impact on people’s words and future behavior.

### ***3. Manage liars***

Whether a colleague or a manager, your consistent opposition to lying will eventually:

1. Stop the lying behavior
2. Motivate liars to leave the organization
3. Motivate them to seek a transfer to another department.

In the latter situation, I would inform my superiors that if the organization permitted this transfer, we would be exporting trouble instead of solving a problem.

It is also possible that the liar survives very well and you become the one whose career is negatively impacted. Organizations (or rather the leaders in this organization) may choose to turn a blind eye and excuse the liar who “gets his numbers”; you may be accused of poor relationship skills, of lack of team spirit, of being rigid, etc. You will have a choice to make, about your future in that organization!

#### ***4. Use caution***

When in doubt, ask for help. When dealing with senior management, ask for advice. When dealing with an expert liar who has survived his lies for years, seek guidance. When you have already confronted someone and lost the skirmish and don't know what to do, e-mail me. I'll be happy to help.

#### ***Conclusions***

Our only real protection against dishonest people is realized when we struggle to be straightforward and behave accordingly. Straightforward folks, adults, managers, leaders and teachers confronted with untrustworthy and dishonest people should use their own strengths: intelligence, competency, professionalism, clarity, sincerity and courage to deal with these events. In doing so we develop strength of character. We also develop a strong reputation and finally we develop a responsible and courageous outlook about life at work.

#### ***If integrity is a competency then it requires training***

A competency is usually a requirement for a person to do his or her job. It includes a blend of knowledge, skills and behavior. We look to competences for achieving a certain level of performance. In this instance, managing integrity would mean to include it in basic orientation programs.

The outcome from such training programs would include a person learning integrity and develop a competence, i.e. the individual knows what is acceptable and what is not, the right behaviors from wrong ones, and as this skill progresses, that person would be able to use his or her judgment to interpret correctly new facts, new situations and new problems not specifically discussed in the training program.

Many organizations find themselves identifying and communicating very specific directives as far as what the organization requires from its resources and what it is not prepared to accept. They teach the do's and don'ts about integrity. These organizations feel that integrity is becoming an essential part of supervision, obligatory for more and more people who have not studied moral and ethical issues. And because there is an increasing societal concern about the perceived decline of moral and ethical values in contemporary life and especially in business, some business leaders are focusing on this issue as we speak.

There is therefore, new interest in moral training or character education.

Some argue that the current social and political climate have contributed to a culture in which many do not know what a genuine moral standard is all about. They believe that by removing such words as right and wrong, courage, bravery, persistence, citizenship and fairness have rendered value-neutral many business environments. Our ability to engage new employees in conversations about moral issues has become dubious if not politically incorrect.

We are not even sure what our role as senior managers is anymore in the moral education and training of our employees. Some mistake moral issues with religion and at that point, rational conversation becomes somewhat difficult. However, the recognition that integrity is a dying or fading value, accompanied by a rise of entitlement, and has fueled a need for integrity to be recognized as a skill and a competitive element in business.

We can identify three training elements that should be part of any orientation program:

General ethics

Required behavior

Professional ethics between employees and with customers.

In this Position Paper, I offer the following thoughts:

Integrity is a skill that needs to be taught.

Organizations cannot rely on existing employees to be a reference

Ongoing training should connect the dots between the job and the behavior

Conceptually, professional ethics should prepare employees to understand and decide what they should do when they have to make a tough decision. That should be the cornerstone of any organization's smarts.

AJH

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