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# Position Paper

A cautionary tale  
about integrity

From a value to a competency

by André John Haddad

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## Position Paper

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

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#### 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. Our level of integrity is again 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. We can safely say that the work place is replete with those opportunities.

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 the sake of the relationship.

What's really exceptional about being honest and true to one's self is that too few leaders in the workplace believe this 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) will present 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.

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 competency in the use of deception, manipulation and treachery to achieve their goals. So when in a struggle with a dishonest person, one does not use his weapons of choice or select the arena.

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

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people should use their own strengths which should include intelligence, competency, professionalism, clarity, sincerity and courage. If you unfortunately do not possess all of those strengths... get help.

### **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 to fast track the development of their resources' development and the acquisition or retention of new and rare competencies through a simple but effective succession planning process. I had originally perfected this process a few years back, using a visually strategic instrument for one of the top legal institution's professional staff of my country.

The VP was explaining to us that he (and his team) had already developed a succession plan but that he would 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 all shook on it.

About 3 minutes away from the cafe, having parted with the VP, the young HR support special-

ist turned to me and asked me quite candidly if she could have a copy of the 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.

Obviously, I refused and called her on her behavior.

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, I had instead decided to confront her.

I believed then that an adult should know what's right and what's wrong. I have since begun to believe a differently 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 in the work place.

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 the young HR support specialist because she was complaining about me and was questioning the necessity of having me around for this 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, intelligent and manipulative set of 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. 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 is 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 conscious that for a great many, displaying ethical behavior wasn't important. Their dysfunction was about immaturity, refusing (or unable) to become an adult and 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 we are witnessing the emergence of a new global 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 devel-

oped or acquired the values we would like to see in young adults such as integrity, honesty, courage 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 one. For now, let's just focus on the issue at hand: Integrity as a competency in the work place. Let's put off until tomorrow how we can change the world.

### **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 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 who 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 eagerly reacted: 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.

Ironically, even if our own integrity is somewhat flexible, most will not take well to unethical or dishonest dealings affecting them 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's 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, Enron, Martha Stewart, Parmalat, S & L, Tyco, The World Bank, the Canadian Sponsorship program,... 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 it to do business and to make our society function.

### **Joining the work force**

Young people entering the work force are at risk: They will join other men and women who have already displayed poor ethical and moral business practices, where the do's and don'ts are not clearly stated. Leaders assume that people know right from wrong. Or 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 and what actions will be punished. Integrity in people is taken for granted or simply ignored if the performance is there. In many work environ-

ments, integrity as a business value is ridiculed as provincial and naive.

The proverbial "blind leading the blind" picture comes to mind when the quick minded and street-wise are to become the leaders of tomorrow.

I believe our management ranks are overflowing with ethically rudderless people. There's no malice involved here, just plain ignorance. Those displaying too much integrity are seen as rigid and are criticized for it. I'm often asked if those people with integrity will play ball. In this context, let me suggest a few questions you can use to assess your own work environment:

1. Do people around me take responsibility for their actions?
2. Do my colleagues talk about the real issues at meetings?
3. How many times do I have to lie in any given day?
4. What do my colleagues really believe in?
5. What do I feel about management?

Answer those questions and evaluate the place integrity plays in your organization. Imagine then, if just for a moment, what a dishonest, intelligent and manipulative individual can do in your work environment populated 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 to quickly assess which options are

socially acceptable from those frowned upon. They provide instant bearings as to what is right and what is wrong for us. 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. Absentee parents in children's upbringing have a devastating impact on this process especially if no one else is concerned with value or moral education.

That said, integrity as a value has been transformed over the last 35 years through social upheavals and profound economic changes. 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 before our eyes. We are encouraging people's sense of entitlement and, as a result, the notion of integrity, respect of others and plain decency is being replaced with other values. Ironically, those feeding the sense of entitlement in 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. They are and will continue to impact

businesses and their relationship with their employees, their customers and their shareholders here and around the world. As far as I can see, companies are either indifferent to these changes or are terrified to accept its existence and implications.

## **Dealing with dishonest individuals**

Honest and dishonest people populate the world because, regardless of our religious beliefs, we are all free to do good or not. It's in our nature. To identify and understand 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.

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. 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 disrespect and accuse 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 and act contrary to that commitment.

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 generates 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 behavior. My favorite fun lie: "Wimbledon called last night; they want advice on how to handle McEnroe". 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 everyday, probably every hour and I'm not so sure about what we are becoming as a society.

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 condoned 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!

### **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 to a possible career, a job, a promotion... If we are not prepared to do battle and live with the possible consequences, then we should simply question their words instead of confronting them personally.

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. Provide for a 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 that 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, could not later be denied. It wasn't just my word against theirs! In that case, I interviewed over 15 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 either

1. Stop the lying behavior,

2. Motivate liars to leave the organization or,
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 affected. 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 place!

## **4. 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.

## **Conclusion**

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 of intelligence, competency, professionalism, clarity, sincerity and courage to deal with these events.

In doing so, we develop strength of character.

We develop a strong reputation.

We develop a responsible and courageous outlook on life at work.

AJH