
High Integrity Leaders: What Successful Executives See

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Abstract

This qualitative study reports the findings of fifty-one structured interviews with successful business executives, asking their views on personal and professional integrity. Nine common or shared perceptions emerge, and center in the shared perception that high integrity people believe truth exists and that it is knowable, that high integrity people cultivate multiple virtues, seek goals more noble than profit-making or accomplishing organizational goals, are governed by inner controls such as conscience, and see integrity as “oneness, wholeness,” and not divisible into a public and private self.

Introduction

In the great scholarly and practitioner conversation about good leaders, almost all conversants seemingly point to integrity as a central, if not the central, variable. The focus is far from new: Xenophon's *Apology* (Strauss, 1970), for instance, begins with Socrates' classic argument that the quality of his long life is his best defense against his accusers, and both the Bible and Plutarch's *Lives*, classic leadership texts through the centuries, are filled with stories of those who led and triumphed by personifying integrity in what they did. A lengthy tradition of teaching about integrity as a means of leading--and of even successfully surviving--has been one result of this cultural inheritance, so that an important integrity literature for managers and leaders has developed (see, e.g.,

Erikson, 1950; Taylor, 1985; McFall, 1987; Srivasva, 1988; Walters, 1988; Babaracco & Ellsworth, 1989; Halfon, 1989; Calhoun, 1995), which stretches even to the global level (Benjamin, 1990; Solomon, 1992; Carter, 1996; Paine, 1997; Petrick & Quinn, 1997; LeClair, Ferrell, & Fraedrich, 1998; Westra, 1998). Because we place such a high premium on high integrity, high trust cultures, which are the outgrowth of high integrity, are encouraged, with the promise that they will conduce toward interpersonal (Covey, 1985; 1989) and leadership effectiveness (Fairholm, 1994) as well as help facilitate cooperation (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Smith, et. al., 1995) lower costs (Frank, 1988; Jones, 1995), promote smooth and efficient market exchanges (Arrow, 1974; Smith, 1981) and improve organizational ability to adapt to change and complexity (Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995; McAllister, 1995). In the leadership literature, written for and by practicing managers and leaders, models are given to enable leaders to gain credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 1993), and take advantage of the fact that people universally are endowed with conscience (Sonnenberg, 1994; Bird, 1996). Integrity and high trust are uniformly placed at the center of interpersonal and executive effectiveness.

Methodology:

What is missing in this discussion is a high resolution photograph of the characteristics which fold together to create the high integrity person. In an effort to begin to paint that picture, we have interviewed fifty executives, some with highly visible careers, some much better described as "unknown personalities," asking about their experience with high integrity people and the standout characteristics which separate such people from the remainder of the workforce. No one was interviewed without first being nominated by three others who identified him or her as a person of high integrity. The interviews, which lasted, on average an hour, began with structured questions, but respondent responses nearly always dictated departing from the structured questions in order to follow-up on ideas suggested. The structured questions were as follows:

1. Could you please define what you mean when you use the word "integrity"?
2. As you think of people who in your experience stand out as having been men or women of high integrity, what are the things which impress you—what did they do which demonstrates high integrity?

3. Can you think of any illustrations where people failed to showcase integrity, and if so, what were the consequences?
4. Is integrity really necessary in order to get good business or organizational results?
5. What, if anything, can we do to cultivate cultures of integrity in the organizations where we work?

Each interview was taped and transcribed into detailed case studies.

Results:

From the interviews conducted, we have begun to sense shared perceptions and expectations with regard to what constitutes a high integrity person. These begin to fold together to create an initial "executive's view" or perception of what integrity is, and what characteristics high integrity people possess. In discussing the data, we have chosen to illustrate the common perceptions with quotations from those interviewed. The general results from the interviews are tabulated and summarized in Table I.

TABLE 1:
Characteristics of High Integrity Leaders Grouped by
Employment Sector and Expressed as Percentages of the Total
Interview Population (N=51).

Characteristics of High Integrity People	% Private Sector Responses	% Public Sector Responses	% Not-For-Profit Responses	Total Number of Responses	% of Total Sample
Recognize and respond to the Promptings of Conscience	18	13	3	34	68%
Cultivate Multiple Virtues	16	11	4	31	62%
Possess a Strong Sense of Task Accomplishment	16	8	1	25	50%
Work for Something Greater than for Profit /Organization Goals: Work for Some “Noble Cause or Purpose”	15	9	2	26	52%
Recognize that Integrity makes Business or Organizational Sense, because:					
It builds trust	18	8	0	26	52%
It increases productivity	13	6	1	20	40%
Emulate Honorable or Noble Role Models	17	14	4	35	70%
“Fill their Minds with Truth”	14	7	2	23	46%
Acknowledge Mistakes When the Make Them	12	5	2	19	38%
Surround Themselves with Systems Which Reinforce Integrity	14	5	1	20	40%

Common Perception Number 1: “High integrity people recognize and respond to the promptings of conscience.”

Most of the interviewees, in one form or another, expressed the belief that the high integrity people they know or had known were men and women who both recognized and responded to the promptings of conscience. This leaves unanswered the entangling questions of where conscience comes from, how it is shaped and molded, whether everyone has conscience, whether it can be numbed or muted, and dozens of other important conceptual questions. It simply assumes that conscience is a unique human endowment, that all men and women, to greater or lesser degree, possess conscience, and that when conscience speaks to the mind,

high integrity people act according to the promptings which they receive. This does not assume that high integrity people follow conscience every time it speaks, but it does assume that they do respond on the preponderance of occasions.

An Illustrative Case:

One interviewee, a former United States Senator, provides perspective. He defined integrity as “one, wholeness”—much as does the Oxford English Dictionary, “like a fabric without a blemish, [one] that doesn’t have any holes in it.” This entails “unity of thought,” he said, adding:

Some people have it. Now, my former occupation [as a U. S. Senator] is full of people who have no such need, for whom getting up and making a speech about the need to control Federal spending, let’s say to balance the budget, on Monday, and voting for some big spending program, or even making a speech supporting [big spending] on Tuesday, simply did not trouble them...[Such people] have the capability of being utterly sincere on Monday and utterly sincere on Tuesday, and somehow being utterly blind to the fact that those two sets of actions do not go together. Some of them can even almost weep in support of both causes. I mean, their heart just weeps for the need to control spending, and the next day their heart just breaks for some project that needs to be funded.

I am the opposite. One of the reasons that I am somewhat unusual in the occupation I was in for a long time, is that it never terrified me a bit, or bothered me or caused me a minute’s concern that I might be defeated at the next election. It would have driven me nuts if I voted two different ways on two different days. That would have just kept me awake at night. I would have thought less of myself. I could not have stood it. I have a high need for gestalt [unity; completeness]. I have a high need to be able to plug every wire in my brain into my every other wire. It’s just a difference in the way we are wired up, I guess.

What was the effect of that “unity of thought” and of honoring conscience? “I slept good!” he said [Interview # 1].

This is an instance where over a life time of living in harmony with conscience, it had become natural, even easy, to follow conscience. At emotional levels, however, it was difficult for him to understand how “double-minded” others could violate conscience. For his part, he was motivated by a desire to be at peace with conscience. Indeed, peace of conscience was more important to him than being re-elected or even of having the approval of his constituents. His sense of self was rooted in the concept of living in harmony with conscience. It was, in short, one of the governing forces in his life—and he recognized it.

At the same time, he was not so governed by political values (and differences) that he could not see integrity in those who differed with him.

U. S. Senator Robert Bird, for example, he described as almost always seeing things in a different light: “much of the twelve years I was in the Senate we (i.e. Bird and himself) were just on opposite sides on issues time after time, and yet I never particularly felt he was simply catering to the special interests that dominate the party. I thought that on almost all occasion he was doing what he sincerely thought was right, even though I thought he was way off base a lot of times” [Interview # 1]. In short, having integrity has more to do with living in harmony with conscience than in subscribing to a particular creed or set of political values, even when the political values are at the core of what one believes.

A Second (and Negative) Illustrative Case:

A second illustration of how conscience shapes conduct, and therefore defines integrity, comes from a young executive who recalled an experience he had as a soldier during the Persian Gulf War. In this instance, he made a choice he later come to regret, but from which he learned a great deal. We identify him by the pseudonym of Bill.

Bill was a non-commissioned Officer, assigned to an Armored Cavalry Regiment. He had received some limited First Aid training prior to arriving in the Gulf, but was not a medical person. On the second day of the ground war his Regiment was assigned to cut off a back door retreat of the Iraqi Army. At one point, they surprised some ill-equipped and retreating Iraqi's, whom the Americans mistakenly thought were attacking. It was “pretty much a turkey-shoot,” said Bill; “the American forces pretty much mowed them down, and I don't know if any were captured, or if they were all killed or what exactly happened.” The following morning, driving through that same battlefield was, in Bill's

words “very gruesome.” There were dead bodies strewn all over the desert. “We literally had to swerve to miss body parts sometimes during that stretch of desert.” The American troop movement was slowed by occasional stops on the road, which included soldiers getting off trucks and out of tanks to look around, to ensure no enemy were hiding in bunkers or other lurking spots: “we had to get out and basically make sure that we were protected. It was very tense, because a lot of the Iraqi’s there were not dead, and it was just real gruesome....”

Bill’s own words best describe what happened: “...at some point we stopped and there was a seriously wounded Iraqi soldier who was thirty yards from me....He got up off the ground, slowly, weakly, shot through the stomach badly, and had some other wound I think too. Of course, that could have been blood from his own belly wounds. He looked like something that is beyond words to describe, and he was trying to slowly walk toward me with whatever strength he had. [He was] not threatening. He did not even have a weapon that I saw. I did not perceive any threat whatsoever. I perceived someone who wanted help and desperately needed help and was wounded badly. As he was coming towards me...I thought ‘well, gosh, I could help this person. I might be able to bandage his wounds, inject him with some pain killers, or something like that to help this guy until someone comes along.’ The whole thing didn’t last more than ten seconds.”

“I remember getting out of the truck, looking around, and all of a sudden I saw this person, who stood up and started coming toward me, and just at that point the radio squawked and said ‘Move out. Move forward, we’re moving,’ or something along those lines. So I got in the truck and we drove off, but I radioed in the co-ordinates and said, ‘There’s a live enemy, a seriously wounded enemy soldier, but he is alive and in need of medical assistance.’ By pushing the ‘save’ button on the satellite GST System I had saved the position, so that later on when I was back in the area looking for lost equipment and what not, I kept looking around to see if I would find him dead.”

Did Bill make the right decision? “No!” he said emphatically. And how did he know? “My conscience bothered me. That was exactly it. My conscience bothered me! That’s why I kept thinking about it, and why I went back to see if someone had picked him up. It was conscience that made me make that radio call, but that was only after I ignored conscience the first time.”

So penetrating were the emotional scars from that experience, that Bill promised himself he would never betray his conscience like that again. In short, the emotional pain from the experience became his teacher—and he vowed never to return to that tutelage. He also noted that just a few days before the interview in which he shared the experience, he had encountered on the highway a car still flaming from an accident, in which several people were burned. “There is nothing like a smell to revive a memory,” he said, “and it reminded me of the whole Desert Storm thing all over again, and how important it is to follow conscience.” Observing that he could not change the past, the memory of the bleeding Iraqi soldier served to remind him “over and over” that “it is easier to do it right [i.e. follow conscience] the first time [Interview # 2].

In both of these illustrative cases, following the prompting of conscience was the standard against which the two people measured integrity, in one instance, peace of mind came from following conscience, and in the second, discomfort and discontent followed the failure to observe conscience. In sum, high integrity people both recognize and respond to the promptings of conscience.

Common Perception Number 2: “High integrity people cultivate multiple virtues, each supportive of the other.”

No virtue stands alone. Each virtue or trait has strength and force only insofar as it is attached to other virtues or strengths. Similarly, one virtue reinforces another. For example, it takes courage to be honest, it requires humility to be teachable, and it takes patience to be kind. Again, the concept is not new. The Stoics and Epicureans of ancient Rome, for example, reasoned the same case, and in so doing were only repeating the arguments of the Greek Aristotelians who had preceded them. The interviewees in this study uniformly saw the same phenomenon. A sampling of their comments illustrates:

[From the Chairman of the Board for an International Consulting Firm, and a highly celebrated author:] (High integrity people) are usually people that have humility, that recognize that they are not God, that there is a God, and that there is something bigger and larger than themselves. They are also people that have a lot of courage, because they usually have to act contrary to social mores and social norms, and following the conscience which God has given them. So I see integrity as essentially the child of humility, and of courage. I think it is also the parent of what I call

‘the abundance mentality,’ or the ability to see all of life as having plenty out there and to spare, and to never get into a comparison or competitive mindset, where they are not genuinely happy for the success of other people. I think it is also the father of wisdom, so that you see things in correct perspective” [Interview # 3].

[From the CEO of a large, International Consulting Firm:] (Integrity) requires the ability to ...actually think “What will I accomplish if I do this, versus that?” Now, I don’t mean that you have to take ten minutes, but you have to take a little bit of time. In highly charged situations the temptation is to respond quickly, when there’s a lot of energy in the room. It takes a lot of discipline to not respond quickly... [Interview # 4].

[From the President of a \$200,000,000 plus per year Construction Company:] Our Mission Statement says: “Construction with Integrity.” ...It requires workmanship, craftsmanship, loyalty to your fellow employees, high quality filing systems to keep your records. All those things. How can we expect our carpenters to do find woodwork, crown mold, chair rail, door trim—to do beautiful, almost artistic woodwork if they’re standing in six inches of dirt and debris from sawdust to soap-up cans? The housekeeping that we insist on in our projects is a passion. It’s the same thing with safety. How can we expect people to do fine quality work if they are working in unsafe conditions? So that’s part of our integrity as well. [Interview # 5].

[From a Senior Executive in the music industry:] We had a wonderful learning from one of the now wealthiest men in the industry. Early, when he was really strapped—I mean desperately in need of money—he said no to a deal which would have made a lot of cash but which also would have violated values he holds dear. He was almost starving, and yet he said no. It takes courage to have integrity at a time like that. [Interview # 7].

These four examples are reflective of the larger sample of interviewees. In almost every instance, interviewees recognized an interrelationship between the multiple virtues which fold together to create integrity. That is, integrity is not really one virtue, but the congealing of many virtues in order to create one unified, harmonious whole. One interviewee, an attorney and Law Firm Partner, thus defined integrity in these terms: “[When I think of integrity] I think of the phrase,

an integrated circuit. That means all the parts come together, and fit snugly and tightly together, and so that circuit works because of all the component parts working together..." [Interview # 6].

Just as multiple virtues combine to create the person with integrity, multiple vices combine to create the low integrity, or dishonest person. The above noted attorney illustrates by telling of working on a case with an attorney from another firm. They agreed to work together, thus coupling their different skills. They also agreed on a financial split. Soon, however, his co-counsel saw a way to increase his share of the winnings, and followed his greed; he then lied about his motive and his conduct. In addition, he broke the established rules of legal procedure, dismissing his violations as "necessary, and then refused to disclose information until compelled by the Bench to do so, thus making the case very difficult to litigate" [Interview # 6].

While the recognition that multiple virtues fold together to create high integrity people may be neither new nor surprising, it is significant that people in the working world, struggling with the problems of getting things done in the organizations in which they work, so uniformly recognize, from their own intuition and training, that the phenomenon exists. It begins to suggest that the "universality of the recognition argues the universality of the concept."

Common Perception # 3: High Integrity People Possess a Strong Sense of Task Accomplishment

Because integrity lies in what we do, and not simply in what we say, high integrity people have a strong sense of commitment to task or of getting the job done. In the words of the former Surgeon General of the Air Force, "it is an internal ability to be honest whether someone else is watching or not..." [Interview # 49]. Indeed, in every instance interviewees identified the source of their commitment to task as important and in turn they could neither be true to self, to their employers, or to their employees unless they worked hard and did thorough work. For them, it was a moral issue: "I expect my employees to give me an honest day's labor for an honest day's pay," said one executive, "and I expect them to do it just because it is the right thing to do, not because they signed on the dotted line" [Interview # 47]. The moral equation is quite simple: "How can I be honest," said another interviewee, "if I promise to do the job, and then don't? If I waste time at the water cooler, or in idle chat, I am cheating my employer. Some such idle chat is

important to build relationships with the people you work with, but it is also important not to waste company time. Didn't Ben Franklin or someone say that wasting time is cheating your employer?" [Interview # 51].

Integrity, however, is not just a matter of putting in one's time; in addition, it has to do with the way we work. One Construction Company President explained that his company has a slogan, or motto, which summarizes everything they do: "Construction with integrity." To him, that slogan has mission statement impact, and means that they must do a great number of different things to support and sustain the central core value of integrity. He gives an illustration:

...Years ago I learned that going to conventions didn't cost money; going to these conferences of best practices never costs us money. We always brought back ideas that saved money. I remember sitting in a conference and getting an idea that immediately saved us \$20,000. How many trips to the Las Vegas Convention Center can you take for \$20,000? We'll spend more this year [on conference attendance], but we will also do \$10,000,000 worth of concrete work. All we've got to do is affect the cost of that by .2% to pay the bills. Learning best practices represents the implementation of our value of trying to build buildings of integrity [Interview # 5].

For this man, the quest for integrity was the quest for excellence, and it included the process of doing everything they did as well as they knew how to do it. For that matter, giving an honest day's labor or exploiting one's capacity to the full is simply a matter of being true to self. Said one interviewee:

I hate not being able to complete a job. There is a great feeling of accomplishment in getting something done. I think of it in terms of self-worth—somehow, proving I can accomplish something makes me feel worthwhile [Interview # 48].

The business of getting the job done, thus, seems to have application at two levels: first, it is a matter of giving the employer an honest day's labor for an honest day's pay; second, it has to do with the developing self to such a degree as to be able to give of one's fullest ability. Somehow, these two traits seemed, in the minds of interviewees, to describe high integrity people.

Common Perception # 4: High integrity people work for something greater than profit or organizational goals; in addition, they work for some “noble purpose.”

As a cultural and economic convention, we have agreed that earning money is not only a necessity, but often noble. A little more than half of those interviewed, however, said that making money was not sufficient: somehow, high integrity people were committed to purposes greater than mere money-making. One interviewee gave an illustration from his youth, in which he played on a Jr. High Basketball team in which the coach required all players to self-report to the referees any personal foul, boundary infraction, or any other rule violation. The coach's intent was to teach that integrity is more important than any ball game. The interviewee explained: “One by-product of the discipline thus developed was the creation of a championship basketball team. I have come to believe the same is true in the business world—doing everything by the rules of integrity will produce the happy by-product of a good income, good relationships with other people, and peace of conscience” [Interview # 50].

From another:

... in the communications business it's the signal to noise ratio...I think, particularly in the Information Age, as we are being bombarded by spin, that there is so much crackle and static that unless you have a basic set of beliefs on which you act, that you have tendency to flail, and that is not integrity. And having integrity means having a purpose. I think, as I look at people that I have observed, that I think have high integrity, it is that they can describe to you what their higher calling is. It is, “Don't make a salary, make a difference.” That is kind of a cliché, but you have a reason to be doing what it is you are doing, and its larger than you, and it's larger than circumstances.

...I think commitment to some noble purpose is probably the only thing that allows you to rise up above circumstance, and recognize that you are just a piece in the larger process or the larger extreme of things that are going on. I think that the clerics have it right in that they call something a vocation, or a calling. We have kind of slurred that term, I think, looking at a vocation as

a technical term, when really the issue is, “what is your calling, what are you here to accomplish?” And “how are you going to do that?” [Interview # 49]

Other interviewees reinforced this same central theme of the centrality to integrity of some purpose more noble than money-making:

One of the great steps forward for me in the business world was when I decided that I didn’t need to get the last nickel in a business deal. That decision that I didn’t have to prevail at the last word, that I didn’t have to always win, has been extraordinarily successful, because of the peace of mind its brought to my life, and the reduction of stress. Now, have I made less money? Have I lost contracts? Has our business been adversely affected? I don’t know, and I really don’t care, because what I have experienced is wonderful, wonderful success, and a sense of joy and fulfillment and peace in the business relationships that we have [Interview # 24].

...money is incidental. To quote from what I think is a classic movie, *Sabrina*, “more money isn’t necessarily better, it’s just more.” It’s absolutely true. Making money in itself is a shallow goal, a goal that is destined for disappointment, because no matter how much you have it’s never enough, and if you are judging yourself by people who have a lot you will always find people with more. So trying to accumulate money to me is a fatal mistake. There will never be any fruition [Interview # 28].

The funnest thing for me, is not building buildings, but building people....We have learned—we have proven!—that experience is over-rated and character is undiscovered. When we hire people, we hire people for who they are, and not for what they’ve done. We can teach people construction, but we really can’t teach them to tell the truth, or to get up early, or to work hard....We can’t change the character of a person, but we can teach them about this business [Interview # 5].

One of the men I most admire in the business world is Ron MacMillan. He was almost one of the founders of the company; he’s been around that long. But when the new ownership came in, and said “we’ll have kind of a family owned

firm,” he had the courage to say, “You know, this is not what I want, so I am going to go and do the very thing I want to do.” So he left and started his own company. Being true to his business purposes mattered more than a high salary [Interview # 17].

From what these people said it seems clear that having a noble purpose at the core of their existence gave greater joy and satisfaction with life than did the acquisition of wealth. This seems to say that when character issues are primary, and money issues secondary, people more naturally think in terms of having a “higher calling” or “vocation,” in life, and they more readily think in terms of “Win-Win” or cooperative relationships, enjoy greater peace of mind, experience less stress, find greater fulfillment in life, and, once their basic needs are met, “really don’t care” if they have made less money than they otherwise might have. Moreover, they come to recognize integrity in others based on their commitment to values, as opposed to the primary purpose of money making. One interviewee, an executive in the music industry, illustrated by telling of his CEO, who refused to do business with a man during a period when, in this cash intensive business, his own company very desperately needed money. Though strapped for cash, the discussion was short, for the CEO intervened quickly, saying: “As much as we need the money...I don’t think that it’s right that we do business with this guy.” Speaking of that experience, the Music Executive said the decision “was a real trust builder for me with him. I knew that he was walking the talk, not just talking. I’ve shared that story a lot with other people, to demonstrate what kind of a man he is” [Interview # 7].

Common Perception #5: “High integrity people recognize that acting with integrity makes business and organizational sense, in that it builds trust and increases productivity.”

More than half of those interviewed said, in surprisingly uniform language, that in the business and organizational world, it is possible to cheat and get away with it in the short run, but that in the long run dishonest and low integrity people are inevitably discovered. They agreed that acting with integrity has the effect of building trust among employees and stakeholders, and therefore made working relationships much more effective. At the same time, they saw high integrity relationships as the basis for increased organizational productivity and profits, especially over the long run. The increases in productivity were typically seen as an outgrowth of higher trust relationships. Some few

others, however, were a little more cautious, saying that whether acting with integrity made business sense depended on what was meant by “business success” or by “integrity.” Once the definitional issues were resolved, they converged on the consensus opinion that integrity was an important part of successful business relationships and performance.

A greater number of interviewees thought integrity important because of its trust-building component (52%) than because it increased productivity or profits (40%), though they generally saw these two phenomena as overlapping, and felt that high trust teams and high trust relationships contributed significantly to increases in productivity and profits. Sometimes high integrity was seen as the source of mental, emotional, spiritual or inner peace, and interviewees spoke convincingly of the power of integrity to create a positive reputation. One attorney, for example, explained that because he had a reputation for honesty, he had greater freedom in his practice. “That is one thing I prize a lot, [is] that I have a good reputation with other lawyers and judges. And that makes a difference, too,” he said, “as judges give me a lot more leeway because they know that I won’t abuse it. When I make a representation that I am being honest they give me the benefit of their judgment. There’s a lot of lawyers they don’t trust, and therefore those lawyers find life a little harder. It’s easier actually if you create that aura of respectability and trust; it makes it easier to accomplish the goals that you want to accomplish” [Interview #6].

Sometimes, however, the focus was directly on financial increases. For instance, the manager of a heating and air conditioning company told one of the most compelling of all the stories told by interviewees:

I was going to take the day off, but had a premonition that I should go in to the office. So I went. I really had nothing to do, but my radio went on. It was one of my lead service men. ... He worked Saturday on a job that should have taken an hour, but took seven. He had a bad experience: he burned up about \$10,000 worth of electronic equipment that manages the fire alarm system in a twelve story building owned by the Utah Retirement Association, and managed by a local company.

Anyway, it turned into a big deal Saturday. He didn’t tell me about it. He went there on the morning I’m talking about,

and come to find out there was more damage, because he shorted a wire out, up in this big mechanical room he was working in, that lead down to the fire management panel. This thing is a computerized system that's probably worth \$50,000. He could have hidden the fact that he did the damage, because there was another company working up on the same machinery that could have done the same thing. But he didn't. He said, "I do believe I caused that problem."

Now this is a company that has been doing business with us for about twelve years, so he got emotional when he told me, because he felt so bad, and because he knew that I would be very concerned. But they said to him, "don't worry about it. We'll cover the cost, because you've been honest with us."

So he called on the radio to tell me he was coming in to talk to me. And then he sat down, broke down and cried, and tells me about the week-end, how he interrupted his family life, got mad at his wife, had a rotten week-end, and he set there and cried in front of me, and said, "You know, I could have saved myself all this grief, but I would have had to tell a lie."

Not surprisingly, the manager telling the story said he had always trusted this particular employee, but that this experience "cements that trust" [Interview #21].

Still, while most interviewees agreed that integrity contributes to both trust-building and increased productivity, the relationship is not always so clear or undiluted. Stephen Covey, prominent business leader and consultant, when asked if "integrity is really necessary for business success" answered:

I say it all depends on what the nature of the business success that you are looking at is. If you are trying to build a strong culture that can produce at very low cost, [with] high quality and very quick response to market, it takes a high trust culture to do that, and a high trust culture requires the same kind of trust and trustworthiness to be the foundation of that culture. If the nature of the business is, say, day-trading or stock speculation, or if you have an unusually good market position, or a patent position, and a brilliant strategy, then I think a lot of people could have a lot of business success with

very little integrity. But if you are trying to build a high trust culture in order to compete in a global economy where low cost and high quality and innovation are important, where quick response rates matter, that takes a lot of trust in the people who work with you. You can't fake it—and that takes integrity [Interview # 3].

In other words, unlike most of the other interviewees, Covey sees that time—the short term versus the long term—is not the only important variable: if the relationships are interdependent, and if long-term relationships are seen as beneficial, then the relationship are likely to be cooperative, or, in “Covey-speak,” Win-Win. In that event, high integrity relationships are important. If, on the other hand, the relationships are competitive, or Win-Lose, high integrity and high trust are not so vital to business success. What it takes to achieve business success thus depends on the nature of the relationship. Covey thus comfortably concludes his thinking on this issue by saying that people can make great amounts of money in Win-Lose ways, but that if that is the preferred interaction style, it will surface in other areas of their lives as well, and they will experience problems in marriages, or with teenagers, or somewhere else. “Ultimately,” he says, “the hens come home to roost, where there is a lack of integrity, but I do believe people can make a lot of money and get a lot of education for so-called success without integrity, depending on the nature of what they are doing” [Interview # 3].

Definitionally, Covey is defining integrity, as “oneness, wholeness, or completeness,” meaning that a person cannot divide character into separate and differing compartments which are not integrated one with another. If one tries to do so, somewhere, integrity lapses will be manifest: if one cheats in one department of life, it will inevitably surface—somewhere. And in that sense, defining integrity as the foundation for business success has important definitional dimensions.

Issues of organizational culture are also important. One Chief Executive Officer explained that when salaries are high, it is sometimes more difficult to maintain integrity, precisely because the money is good. “When I was a partner in a Big Five, and what was then a Big Eight Accounting Firm, there was a client where they actually had to pay their people almost fifty-percent above market because the CEO was so brutal to his people—awful! You wouldn't want to work for him

on a bet, but you could make a lot more money working for him than working anywhere else, and so a lot of people just put up with it.” When asked if people would then work for this CEO for a few years, making large salaries, and then leave, he explained that such thinking was illusory—once life style and earning expectations were set, it became increasingly difficult to simply walk away. In those instances, sacrificing integrity to maintain a certain life-style became easier [Interview # 4].

One important feature dealing with business success is that interviewees seemed to want integrity to be important to their success. That is, because integrity was so important to them, they chose to believe that it was also important to their success. As with all of us, they saw the world through their preferred filter—in this instance, the value of integrity. Wanting integrity to be important is different from integrity actually being important. This awareness even led the CEO of one of the larger Consulting Firms in the country to suggest that integrity is not essential to business success. “Take the Mafia, for example,” he said. “The Mafia has been one of the most successful businesses in the country for years and years and years but I don’t think anybody accuses the Mafia Dons of having high integrity, at least as most people define it. They have their own definition of loyalty, but that is different from integrity. So no, I think you can be successful without integrity, if business results are defined by profitability. At least you can be successful for some period of time, and I don’t know what it is, without having integrity” [Interview # 4].

Common Perception # 6: High integrity people emulate honorable or noble role models

This shared perception is easily defined: people imitate those people whose behaviors they value. Thus it is that high integrity people not only possessed noble or high integrity role models, but were on the constant search for additional exemplars. In some instances these role models were living, and most frequently included family members, especially parents and grandparents; in other instances, the role models were dead, and included people like Jesus, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and family members who had passed away. Where the role models were people whom interviewees had known, they were typically people who had had kindly feelings for and warm interactions with interviewees, which helps explain, perhaps, why family members scored so high in interviewee affections and

esteem. Where the role models were dead, they typically included famous people whom most, at least in the American culture, would identify as having high integrity. They included political figures, religious leaders, and others whose lives demonstrated important social and civic commitments, like British politician and anti-slave activist Wilbur Wilburforce. From whatever source, role models inspired interviewees: "I think the reason I'm attracted to [role models] is because [they] make me feel better about my potential; [they] make me want to become like them," said one interviewee.

The distinguishing feature surrounding those chosen as role models was their integrity. Thus, interviewees crossed political, religious, ethnic, racial and gender lines in identifying exemplars. Former U. S. Senator William Armstrong, a Republican, thought very highly of West Virginia Senator Robert Bird, a Democrat. Even though ideological and political differences separated them by a wide margin [Interview #1, p. 7].

Similarly, committed Protestants and Catholics selected as high integrity role models those whose religious views differed from their own. Anwar Sadat, a Muslim, and Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu, were also frequently mentioned as high integrity role models, even though no interviewee identified himself/herself as Muslim or Hindu. This is not to say that interviewees subscribed to the religious views of those whom they admired, for they very clearly did not. They did, however, admire the commitment which those others held for their own preferred religious expression. The same is true of racial lines—Nelson Mandela was identified as one whose integrity was admirable, for example, and made the more so because he had the ability to see beyond racial differences: "Mandela is marvelous," said one. "When he was inaugurated as the new President of South Africa, he spoke of unity, and of forgiveness, and of going forward and putting away the prejudices of the past, and sitting on the front row in front of him were the jailers who had held him captive for twenty-nine years. Their very presence symbolized that he was living the message he was delivering. That's integrity!" [Interview # 3]. Another white Chief Executive told with satisfaction a story of his daughter, a law school student, having a luncheon with U. S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who is a black African American, and of the integrity she thought Thomas showed in what on the surface appeared to be conceptually contradictory rulings he had made from the bench [Interview # 4].

The Clarence Thomas illustration is important, because in this sample he is the lone illustration of one being chosen for what might be called “intellectual integrity.” In every other instance, role models were chosen because they were “men or women of action,” or people who had made difficult decisions and done difficult things under the pressures of life. In some instances, awareness of the integrity of the other was heightened by a familiarity with a role model in the same profession, such as the attorney who spoke approvingly of judges and some of his fellow attorneys, elected officials who did the same for other elected officials, and business people who appreciated the honest accomplishments of fellow business people. Others, however, appreciated the moral qualities of those who shared no professional or occupational ties. One Board Chair and Company President, for example, shared a story about a friend of his, Professional Golfer Gary Player:

At the end of each day of play must go in the scoring tent and record the score; if you leave the tent before you have recorded your score, you’re disqualified and they throw you out of the tournament. That’s just one of the PGA rules. He went into the tent, and there was a line there, and for some reason he left the tent. Then he came back to the tent to record his score. Now nobody saw him leave the tent. When it came time to record his score, he said, “You know I left the tent accidentally a few minutes ago and came back. I know that’s an infraction of the rule. I just want you to know I did that.” And they threw him out of the tournament, and he was leading the tournament. He didn’t have to do that. But he did that because he is a guy who is congruent with his values [Interview # 20].

Just as interviewees admired people they knew, most of them also had a store of stories and anecdotes about heroes or role models whom they had not known, but about whom they had read. It seems significant that they could tell stories about these heroes without pause; they were so familiar with the stories that it seemed they had told them repeatedly. It was in this context that they told stories about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Harry S. Truman, Ronald Reagan, Alexander Hamilton, J. Pierpont Morgan, John and John Quincy Adams, Edmond Ross, Viktor Frankl, Sara Barton and Florence Nightengale—to name but a few.

One final note about role models is important: the notion of integrity is so compelling, that some interviewees found that negative examples actually dramatized and reinforced the positive trait. One Air Force Lieutenant, for example, told of his parents divorcing, and of his father then remarrying a woman who showed a great deal of favoritism among the children and tried to hide that favoritism by lying. That negative emotional experience scripted him: "I swore I would never behave like that—ever!" he said [Interview # 51]. Another said: "I've found an interesting thing, that people who gravitate to certain values tend to learn them in one of two ways. They learn them from people who exemplify the values, or they learn it from people who exemplify the opposite and it builds in them a determination to be different than that" [Interview # 4]. Others gave similar examples from business competitors, professional associates, and even from people they had only read or heard about.

Common Perception # 7: High integrity people fill their minds with principles of truth.

In one way or another, high integrity people find ways to reinforce the notion of integrity so that it is easier to understand and to live. In addition to having heroes or role models, interviewees consistently did things to reinforce the concept in their minds: they read materials which illustrated or talked about integrity and related topics, and often had preferred biographical, philosophical, religious, literary or other reading materials which showcased people behaving with integrity. The assumption underlying this reading seemed to be that truth, as an abstract concept, existed, and was real, and that the awareness of truth was somehow at the base of high integrity behavior. Thus, the process of reading to both acquire and reinforce integrity has the flavor of seeking to "fill the mind with truth." One interviewee put it thusly:

I not only think that people of integrity fill their minds with truth but they always recommit to it, almost on a daily basis. It's what I call a daily private victory....I for example, read the scriptures. I read the wisdom literature of almost every tradition. I can teach my material out of the Koran, out of the Bhagavad-Gita, which contains the teachings of the Hindu. I love a novel like *Les Miserables*, *Moby Dick*—I love to read about inspiring people like Thomas More, and that was my favorite movie [i.e. *A Man For All Seasons*]. In fact, I received the

Thomas More Medal from that College one time. That was one of the greatest honors I ever felt because...he is a person who really exemplified a quiet peaceful integrity. He tried to compromise where he had to but not on fundamentals. I like to read Gandhi, and people like Peter Drucker, and other great business theorists [Interview # 3].

Not surprisingly, in the North American culture, from which all interviewees come, the Bible ranked high as reading material. Biographies, histories, and business books were also frequently mentioned. Occasionally, an interviewee had a particular interest in given topic such as Greek mythology, which he or she would read in part for its moral value: "I am going to read *Bulfinche's Mythology*. I love the ancient Greeks and Romans, and think their stories teach important moral values," said one [Interview #8]. Another, with a similarly specific interest, said: "I have promised myself I would read Plutarch's *Lives*, and I am getting close to fulfilling that promise"[Interview #1]. Uniformly, those who mentioned prominent role models (like Washington, Lincoln, Truman, etc.) could mention specific things written about them that they had read, and spoke with specific illustrations from books like Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* or Nelson Mandela's book, *Long Walk to Freedom*. The Chair of the Ethics Committee in the U. S. House of Representatives, mentioned that for leisure reading he enjoyed fiction—novels by Louis L'Amour. When asked what the particular attraction was to these novels, he said, "Oh, I suppose it is the good-guy bad-guy conflict. I am just refreshed when the good guy wins."

Lt. General "Chip" Roadman felt that it was so important to fill the minds of his subordinates with "right" and "healthy" ideas and ideals, that he told of organizing a reading club for those he worked with:

...one of the things that I've done in the organization is that I've had a reading club, a book a month club, for people who work with me. Then we get together and we talk about what it means to us as people, as an organization, what was good about it, what was not, so that we try to apply these things. I probably read two or three books a week, but I was told one time by a dentist in Europe that the people I was leading felt they were subjected to the last book I read. I said, "well, what do you mean by that?" He said: "Well, you read stuff and you try it." Of course, my

response was, “Why else would you read it?” So what it really means is taking what we are learning and trying to incorporate it into being better at what we do [Interview # 49].

Interestingly, those who spoke of the importance of filling their minds with truth, evidenced having done so by things they could quote or refer to in conversation. Several had even developed or adopted aphorisms which captured ideals which they thought important. For example:

“It is easier to stop committing adultery than to stop lying” [Interview #49].

“This sounds sort of cliché like, but in my view the victim mentality is absolutely anti-integrity” [Interview # 49].

“The time to build relationships of trust is when you have nothing to sell” [Interview # 5].

“My Dad used to always say, ‘If you have to think about telling the truth, then you are probably going to lie’” [Interview # 21].

“I worked for a guy in Utah who always said: ‘You gotta first be honest with yourself if you are going to be honest with me’” [Interview # 21].

“Always act as if you are on videotape, and the whole world has VCR’s” [Interview # 8]

One interviewee, a government employee, had a plaque hanging on his office wall, which captured his goal. The quote it contained comes from *The Federalist Papers*, Number 57, by James Madison: “The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust” [Interview # 26]. While not a simple aphorism, it serves the same purpose.

Common Perception # 8: People of high integrity acknowledge mistakes when they make them.

The failure to acknowledge mistakes, or at least to claim ownership for them, is a form of deception. The interviewees in this study acknowledged without reservation their imperfections, and expected that people in the work setting would make mistakes, sometimes serious ones. A little more than one-third of the interviewees, added, however, that the additional mistake of trying to hide previous errors, not only created problems in terms of getting the job done, but also undermined trust levels. One CEO, a retailer, was very specific about what to do with people who tried to hide their errors by lying. "We fire them!" he said, explaining that "we expect mistakes, but we also expect that when you make a mistake, you are up front about it, so we can make corrections. Honest employees admit errors. Dishonest ones pretty soon become former employees, because we can't trust them" [Interview # 20]. Another Executive, a Senior Vice President for Human Resources at a large bank, who he is responsible for some 7,800 employees, told of one of their tellers who said some things a customer thought insulting. The customer, in turn, threatened the teller, who was honest with his manager about what had happened. The Vice President summarized the Bank response: "...nobody around here will ever get in trouble for telling the truth; what you get in trouble for is hiding information." He told a second story that emphasized the same principle: one of the Bank Officers had gone to a neighboring State to install a new computer system in one of the Branch Offices. He opted for a new system, without authorization, saying to the manager in the Branch Office, "Now don't tell my boss that I did this, or I will be in a lot of trouble." He too was let go. He had a high level of professional skills, but his endeavor to hide his mischief making represented a character flaw the Bank felt it could not overlook. The Vice President summarized the Bank's view: "If he'll lie about one thing he'll lie about something else, and how do you know what's going on? He even tried to lie about what he had done, even though we had the testimony of the Branch Manager."

Had he told the truth about what he had done, rather than trying to hide his mischief, the Bank "by instinct, would have been more willing to listen, and at least explore whether things could be worked out so that he could stay" [Interview # 47].

Common Perception # 9: People of high integrity surround themselves with systems which reinforce high integrity.

With regard to building systems which reinforce integrity, interviewee responses fell into two general categories: 1) the construction of formal institutional systems which monitored and governed conduct in ways which encouraged and rewarded people to act with integrity; and 2) shaping the culture of the organization in ways that encouraged people to act with integrity. None questioned that they were both institutionally and individually obligated to live with integrity, or to reinforce the importance of doing so.

Organizations build their own formal systems, and interviewees had little to do with them beyond living with them and reinforcing them. Some occupied formal roles where they had signature and approval authority, where they would oversee accounting systems, personnel systems, disciplinary systems or reward systems that encourage desirable behaviors. Such formal systems as these are typically in place and self-sustaining, and interviewees said little about them, other than to acknowledge their existence. The two striking exceptions were a Banker and a Deputy Chief of Police of a large metropolitan police department, both of whom work in environments where the law so shapes acceptable conduct that they tended to define integrity in terms of compliance with the law. "The law forces us to be honest," said the Banker. "In fact," he continued, "by regulation, if we either suspect or find embezzlement, defalcation, or anything like that, where people are taking money or playing with funds, we have to report it to Law Enforcement Agencies. So it is very different from working with McDonald's. We explain to employees that if you work for McDonald's and steal \$5 out of the till, they'll fire you. If you work for us and steal \$5 out of the till, we fire you and the U. S. Attorney comes after you. We are highly regulated and there are severe penalties for dishonesty" [Interview #47]. In a similar vein, the Deputy Chief of Police said: "We train our people in what the law says. After all, they are Law Enforcement Officers, and you can't enforce what you don't know. Then we train them some more, and some more, and some more. They can not function if they are not current on the law, and if they break the law, we investigate immediately, and act according to the law, and do it very publicly" [Interview # 8]

In terms of building systems which teach and reinforce integrity, however, interviewees saw themselves much more involved in shaping culture. They spoke of modeling expected and acceptable behaviors, and noted that some interaction and leadership styles were more conducive to maintaining and encouraging integrity than others. Some

also mentioned the importance of seeking out the association of high integrity people, building networks with them, and learning how they think and interpret the world.

Of all these efforts to reinforce culture, nothing stood out so clearly as the importance of setting expectations for the work place. “We set a tone, so people know they are accountable,” said the President and Chairman of the Board of a large time management and consulting firm, “and one of the things we do is react swiftly around breeches of integrity....If you show zero tolerance for [theft], that starts to communicate the message that that is the culture you want.” He gave an illustration:

I had a really tough situation where one of our salespeople was also a member of my same church, and he knew it. He started using his company credit card for personal stuff. One of the people up there turned him in. When we found that out, we confronted him, and he tried to dodge it forever. We presented the absolute dead cold evidence, and then he finally broke down and admitted it. His expression was, “Well, gee, we believe in repentance and forgiveness. Surely this is okay.” We said, “Yeh, it is okay, we’re not going to put you in jail, but you’re not going to work here anymore.” He was blown away by that. It was a decision we had made long before, and it didn’t matter who got caught in the trap, that was the price for stealing from the Company—you just don’t work for the Company. We were not going to prosecute him, though literally we could have put him in jail” [Interview # 20].

“I think you cultivate integrity in people by being up-front and honest and open about everything,” said another. He concluded: “people lie about their feelings because they don’t know what the expectations of the other person are regarding their feelings” [Interview # 21]. The former CEO of another large company said “I think...characteristics like integrity are primarily fostered by the tone set at the top of the organization, and that tone cascades down. When integrity is exemplified and rewarded and politics or duplicity is identified, exposed, and corrected, then the culture moves in the desired direction. People who are uncomfortable in an open environment where people are candid and honest tend to leave the environment, and those who want to participate in that kind of an environment tend to stay” [Interview # 4]. The Deputy Police Chief agreed: “Set the expectations,

and establish the standards. And remember, it all starts at the top” [Interview # 8].

Setting an example at the top seems to include assuming an interaction and leadership style that is compatible with high integrity interactions. To illustrate, one attorney told of an opposing attorney whose deliberate style was to try and intimidate. It had the effect, he said, of causing others to “dig in their heels,” causing conflicts to grow. He concluded that one must “assume the responsibility oneself for being the kind of person you would want to go against in the courtroom” [Interview # 6]. For the former U. S. Senator, reading different newspapers (he gets six at his house) helps him to know how others perceive things so that he can benchmark his perceptions against theirs; it helps him to “keep that inner moral compass pointing true north” [Interview # 1]. Another public servant deliberately sought out the association of the “best and the brightest,” he said, “and those with the highest moral standards” as a means of reinforcing his own commitment to living in accord with conscience. Because culture grows out of behavior, the behaviors of high integrity tend to create high integrity cultures.

Limitations to the Study:

Some limitations attend this study, which influence the ability to generalize from the findings. First, the case studies are not drawn from a random sample, and were identified largely on the basis of executives we already knew, and then in turn those that these executives referred to us. Because we all choose to associate with people who are to some degree similar to ourselves, and who share values which we hold to be important, the nature of the sample raises the danger that we have interviewed a set of “like-minded” executives, who simply share values we hold to be important.

Conclusion

The interview data described herein suggest some common themes captured in what we have chosen to call “common perceptions,” each of which describes one dimension of the man or woman of high integrity, at least as the interviewees perceived them. They certainly reflect the printed practitioner bias that high integrity people respond to the promptings of conscience, which in some instances is so bold as to

suggest integrity, trust and commitment may be a company's competitive edge, and that "conscience must be the guide and new bottom line" (Brown, 1995). In addition, the interviews suggest a bias in favor of integrity which associates it with the acquisition of multiple virtues, the drive to complete a task, and the belief that while one might obtain short-term business or organizational success if acting without integrity, integrity is central to long-term business success where relationships are interdependent or where long-term relationships are deemed desirable. The data hold tightly to the conviction that business and organizational success are compatible, much as other practitioner literature has done (see, e.g., Watson, 1991; Babaracco & Ellsworth, 1989; Paine, L., 1997; Solomon, 1992).

At the same time, interviewees seem to assume the existence of truth as an abstract concept, and that awareness of truth was a fundamental part of exercising integrity. That is, integrity has the quality not simply of knowing what is right, but of having the will and courage to do what is right. Integrity, then, is "Living the truth." The nine common perceptions listed in the body of this paper all seem to reinforce the ability to live, or "do the truth." This means that believing in integrity is more than just a way of giving interpretive meaning to life and its events, it becomes a guiding north star director for high integrity people.

One underlying concept which ties these nine perceptions together is the rejection of the situational ethic, or the notion that "it all depends on the situation," as Babaracco and Ellsworth (1992) have elsewhere suggested. Indeed, Babaracco and Ellsworth interviewed Chief Executives of Fortune 500 Companies, and obtained results remarkably similar to those in this report, thus beginning to hint that from the common elements of both data sets a theory of integrity might begin to surface. Because there are no particular differences in the perceptions of those in the private, public or not-for-profit sectors, we might safely assume that such a theory could be rather broad in scope.

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