



Low Integrity

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Most of my writing is about trust and high integrity, but this article is about low integrity. We know it exists because there are numerous examples in our daily life that point to individuals doing something that they espouse is for the greater good, but is really to advance their own purposes.

I have been told to stay away from sex, religion, and politics in public writing, so I will not reveal any political bias here; however, it is easy to detect some pockets of low integrity in the Congress. What constitutes low integrity versus gamesmanship on any particular day depends on the issue at hand and which side of an issue a particular person sits.

In reality, we exist in a sea of low integrity, and this article is intended to make us more aware of the difficulty sorting through what is a problem with integrity and what was well intended but flawed behavior. When we see flagrant violations of integrity, it is not hard to come to agreement that the person was duping the public. There are hundreds of examples of this from Bernie Madoff to John Edwards. In the extreme, some people just do what benefits them regardless of who it hurts.

The other extreme is also easy to spot. In any community you can find people who give amazing amounts of time and money to support causes while expecting nothing in return.

The extremes are easy to identify, but the majority of actions taken by people in routine business or personal decisions are somewhere between those extremes. At some point you cross the moral line between high integrity and low integrity. It is not my desire to judge anyone in this article. I think each person has to decide on a case by case basis where the moral line exists. That decision tells a lot about the ethical fiber of the person, and yet it is not so simple to decide which activities are OK and which ones have crossed the line. For some people, anything short of saintly behavior is wrong while others will draw the line between good and bad just short of something being illegal.

At its core, integrity is about honesty. If we purport to be taking an action to advance a noble cause yet really are mostly trying to increase our own wealth, then we are guilty of low integrity? To understand if an action is good or bad, we really need to dig deep into our psyche to understand our true motivations. For example, maybe we really did take that action to help reduce homelessness and the improvement in our status was simply a by-product we obtained by networking with many new people.

The trigger for this article came from a discussion about the magnitude of low integrity in the world and that we only observe a tiny fraction of the deceit that goes on. Most of it goes undetected, because we are simply unaware that the person had an ulterior motive. An even deeper question is how would the person himself come to grips with his own true intentions. In other words, where is the line of demarcation between doing something for others and helping one's self?

It is fascinating to have the debate with myself trying to figure out if I have high integrity. Let's examine a specific example for clarity. I provide an excellent leadership assessment on my website free of charge. It really is totally free because I do not even ask people to register with their e-mail address when they take it, so I am not trolling for addresses. Furthermore, I offer a free consultation to suggest things that might be helpful to the person based on his or her specific profile, but only if that person contacts me, and even then I am giving but not selling. In other words, most of the experts would call me crazy for giving something away with absolutely no strings attached.

I chose to set it up totally free because of three statements in my own strategic framework. 1) I have a Value for my business that states "Give more than you receive," 2) a second Value states "Giving away content is a good thing to do," and 3) one of my corporate behaviors is "Go the extra mile to help others." That all sounds altruistic, but do I have some kind of ulterior motive in the back of my mind? Do I want to further the cause of my business? Of course I do! That is not a bad thing to do. But then am I giving away content not just to help other people but with some hope that the universe will find ways to return the favor?

You can go slowly insane trying to decipher motives, and nearly all of the time the true motivations are hidden from view. We fool ourselves into thinking that we are doing good just for the sake of doing good. Perhaps some of us actually do that. I will never know. I do a lot of volunteer work myself, but I could and should do more.

The "pay it forward" mindset is an approach to living that is highly appealing. It is fun to help other people, even when you know there will be no direct payback. In fact, there is a payback, and it happens instantly. It is called satisfaction or self esteem. So the person who says, "I volunteer to help out this cause because in the end it makes me feel good," that person is not guilty of low integrity.

We need to realize that there is always a return for every good deed. It does not spell incorrect behavior to do good things simply for the joy it brings, but when we do something that looks good on the surface, but in reality we are raking in the cash from some unseen source, then we are guilty of low integrity. The line between high integrity and low integrity must be drawn by each individual based on his or her level of morality. My hope is that more people will examine their true intentions rather than rationalize questionable behaviors.

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