

IntegrityWorks: Tools and Skills to Build Integrity

Chapter 1. The Greatest Honesty is to Ourselves

“Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become.”^[1] — Steve Jobs, cofounder and former Apple Inc. CEO

When I told Vinca Russell, senior manager of global ethics & compliance communications, training, and initiatives at Ingersoll Rand, that I was writing a book on integrity, she said it got her “thinking about a few things in my life. Mainly being honest with myself . . . we so often think about honesty as it relates to what we say and do to/for *others*. The greatest honesty, in my humble opinion, is to *ourselves*.”^[2]

Of all the things she could have said about integrity, she had no idea that I consider this idea to be so important. She had no idea that I feel we have to work on honesty within ourselves before we can have integrity with others. She, in my humble opinion, hit the nail on the head. If we are not honest with ourselves, we cannot understand what our core beliefs are and make decisions that adhere to them. We cannot be authentic in our lives and we cannot be honest with others.

What is Authenticity?

Here are a few of my favorite descriptions of an authentic person:

- Not false or copied; genuine; real.^[3]
- Representing one's true nature or beliefs; true to oneself or to the person identified.^[4]
- Being actually what is claimed.^[5]
- The extent that [a person's] conduct towards others accords with what [the person] truly believes in.^[6]

Cultures and Norms

Being authentic helps you make more measured and balanced decisions that align to your beliefs. This benefits your personal life as well as your professional life. Yet many organizational cultures beg you to be someone else, expecting you to conform to their ideal behavior, thinking, or norms. Large organizations, especially, often have strict rules about “what is acceptable to say or do here.” During my almost 40 years of managing people, I struggled with this too. Eventually, I realized that people were often more productive if they were left to just be themselves. Some managers really don’t know how to run a business, so they micromanage their employees and

focus on minutia and policies. They fuss over trivial things—like telling you what to say or how to act. Ironically, what these kinds of unnatural expectations can lead to is an inauthentic workforce.

Most organizations have a mission statement, value statement, and principles they use to develop a certain kind of culture. They define acceptable standards of behavior within a company and the organization's values. Most standards are very rational definitions of good and honest ways to interact with one another in the workplace. However there are also unofficial norms not listed in the organization's values or principles. They are often discussed one-on-one from mentor to mentee, at quiet lunches with no one else listening. These norms are present, but rarely openly discussed. The problem starts when these unofficial norms conflict with who you really want to be. That is when the war on your authenticity begins.

I know about working in a place where I couldn't be my authentic self and how it impacted my integrity. I was in administration at a major healthcare system for 10 years. Many consider it to be the best healthcare system in the world and I wholeheartedly agree. However, healthcare organizations are at great risk of developing an "excessive culture." By excessive, I mean a culture that excessively values one group of employees over another. In the healthcare system I worked in, that meant sometimes choosing to keep doctors happy over doing the right thing. I think this tends to happen in healthcare systems, because doctors gain so much respect for returning people to good health and they also generate large amounts of revenue for the systems. Where I worked, this led to a culture where the doctors could do no wrong, even if it meant bending the rules.

Cultivating Common Sense

Part of being genuine is having common sense. But there isn't just one form of common sense—it comes in many forms. There's common sense in business, raising a family, fixing things around the house, and so on. Some believe that you either do or don't have common sense, but that is a myth in my opinion. It can be a natural gift, something you're born with . . . and that perspective is to some degree true. But we can overcome the lack of a natural gift by learning. You can gain common sense through study and repetition. We can learn how to be handier around the house from practice, trial, error, and watching how-to videos online. If we don't try, we cannot improve. The same is true for common sense. It is something that can be developed and cultivated.

I would pick something that you have always wanted to get better at, are not very knowledgeable about right now, and work hard on it for a while. It can be something personal, a hobby like woodworking, or something more work-related, like negotiating. Then as a dear friend of mine, Bojan Bajić, who lives in Sarajevo says, "Try and then learn. Try some more and learn some more."

One of my issues at that healthcare system was about certain purchasing decisions. Some purchasing decisions were based on ego and lacked financial justification. When I tried to debate the wisdom of a purchasing decision, idea, or plan, different peers and leaders strongly discouraged me from debating with doctors. A former colleague shared a similar story to mine—something that's not atypical in the healthcare setting. He was called into his boss's office and told, "I heard about your disagreement with Dr. X. You were right and he was wrong . . . but never forget, the doctors are always right here. Don't do that again." There were many times when debate was encouraged in the system where I worked, but it was also discouraged. A number of discussions ended simply because of someone's job title. I struggled with the decision-making process there.

These examples show that it's not always easy for us to completely be ourselves while also conforming to cultural norms. When cultural expectations push you to go against what you know is right and what is best for the company as a whole, then I believe they go too far. Those are the moments that force you to make an ethical decision, one that may not be too popular in your culture. What kind of decision would you make? Would you go along with the norms to keep most people happy, even if it is detrimental to your company? Or would you make the decision that aligns with your core beliefs, although it may challenge the directives of certain colleagues? It's not an easy decision to make.

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