

When No One Is Looking

Message to CFOs: Honesty is a virtue only when it's accompanied by integrity.

Bud Kulesza

When living in my home state of Texas, one becomes acutely aware of what's known as the "Code of the West." No written version of the code has ever been found, but the unwritten one served as guidance for winning respect (and surviving) out West. As John Wayne famously said, "A man's got to have a code, a creed to live by, no matter his job."

Few phrases are more applicable to today's CFOs, who are often obliged (another good word from the West) to be a moral compass for their organization in order to command respect. But while honesty and integrity together have an enormous positive impact, when one exists without the other, the result can be the opposite.

Honest and integrity are not synonymous. In *Who Moved My Cheese?* author Spencer Johnson writes that integrity is telling *yourself* the truth. Honesty is telling the truth to *other people*. And when practiced with a lack of integrity, honesty alone provides a poor example for others to follow.

Tale from the Trenches

I once worked in an environment that was very open; where information was readily shared, including discussions as to how we might make certain issues "just go away" by "doing whatever it takes." There was a lot of honest talk that provided visibility into significant differences in integrity among the participants. There was a notable lack of shared values.

Discussions revolved around how far we might push the envelope in our resolution process by doing just enough of the right thing to get by without raising concerns. We discussed only the minimal requirements. Beyond that, it wasn't what was said, but what *wasn't* said that was the problem. What exactly should be done was left to interpretation, and if some interpreted it incorrectly, then that was their fault. It was not reinforced that "whatever it takes" should include only good business practices in compliance with laws, regulations, and company policy. It all created significant risk for the people involved and the company.

Having integrity, on the other hand, means firmly embracing the values of the code you follow, without exception — whether it is the Code of the West, the ethical standards set forth for your profession, or the value imperative established by your company.

Walk the Talk

Doing the right thing involves value judgments. Do yours reflect what you truly believe, or are you paying them lip service? Remember, outward actions reveal inner values. If I asked you whether you lie, I'm pretty sure you'd say no. But if I asked whether withholding information is the same as lying, would the answer be the same? That's an example of where people sometimes begin to deviate from their core values.

The Code of the West says you're only as good as your word, and handshakes are more binding than a contract. To boost your effectiveness and influence within your organization, make sure your words and actions consistently reflect your inner values. Integrity is often described as doing the right thing when no one is looking. What is it when you do the right thing when others *are* looking? I call it leadership.

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