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What Message Does Your Conduct Send?

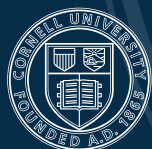
Building Integrity to Boost Your Leadership Effectiveness

by Tony Simons, Ph.D.

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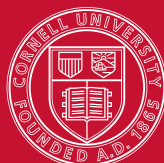
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A suite of studies demonstrates the importance of managers' acting in keeping with their verbalized commitments and stated beliefs. While this seems to be a logical proposition, the studies explained in this paper demonstrate some of the challenges that arise from conflicting priorities and how to address those conflicts. Although the studies were conducted in the healthcare, hospitality, and aerospace industries, as well as in Belgium and the United States, the results highlight the a principle that applies to all industries. Management consistency in speech and action promotes employees' performance and corporate outcomes. At the same time, perceived management hypocrisy is actively destructive of workplace attitudes and performance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tony Simons, Ph.D., is an associate professor at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, teaching courses in organizational behavior, negotiation, and leadership. His research examines trust—employee trust in leaders, executive team member trust, and trust in supply chain relationships. In particular, Simons has focused on how well people are seen as keeping their word—delivering on their promises and living espoused values. This simple perception has huge practical consequence and is challenging to maintain impeccably. His research and consulting work supports managers in meeting this challenge. He speaks, trains, consults and designs surveys for organizations both within and beyond the hospitality industry.

What Message Does Your Conduct Send?

Building Integrity to Boost Your Leadership Effectiveness

by Tony Simons

Industry practitioners and academic researchers have long understood the importance of leaders' behavioral integrity. I have studied and consulted with companies about this key element of leadership for the past fifteen years, and in the course of this study I have identified an essential element in management integrity. Not only must the manager act in concert with her or his statements, but people must believe or observe that a leader truly means what he or she says. Thus, as I discuss in this report, behavioral integrity involves both the leader's actions and the followers' beliefs about that leader.

This matter goes beyond the core element of integrity enunciated by such researchers as Kouzes and Posner, that is: do what you say you will do.¹ As I have stated elsewhere, establishing behavioral integrity is not quite so simple in execution.² The complexity comes from two sources:

1. Delivering on your word consistently is a challenge that requires a broad range of skills and habits. Circumstances change, we tend to be optimistic about what we can deliver, we make commitments we do not mean or are ambivalent about, and we are sometimes caught in conflicting priorities; and
2. Maximizing credibility requires that we are seen by others as honoring commitments. That means we must ensure that others correctly hear the promises we make and the values we espouse. We must communicate clearly and overcome the cynicism about leaders that forms a background against which most of us are measured.

Because of the difficulty of maintaining behavioral integrity and the practical consequences that follow success or failure in so doing, maintaining integrity must be a good leader's first priority, as personal effectiveness depends utterly on credibility. Behavioral integrity and the credibility it engenders are not all it takes to lead or all it takes to be trusted. However, although we don't yet have full empirical support for this assertion, I believe that no effective leadership can happen without it.

It's important to note at the outset that behavioral integrity cannot offset weak leadership, poor decision making, or the low morale that might emerge from insufficient concern for the wellbeing of employees. I also grant that leaders sometimes must break a spoken or implied promise due to changing circumstances or competing priorities. In these circumstances the optimal path might not be the one that maximizes behavioral integrity, though it remains wise to consider and manage the implications of one's actions for one's credibility.

Maintaining behavioral integrity is a challenge. Quantitative studies and interviews strongly suggest that leaders of an impeccable word are quite rare—most people can name at most one or two. Further there is considerable variation across managers, even at workplaces that put an explicit premium on strong follow-through and honest dealings. As I explain in this report, this variation across managers appears to drive differences in the performance of those who report to these managers. While the concept of integrity has

¹ Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993, 2003).

² Tony Simons, *The Integrity Dividend: Leading by the Power of Your Word* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2008).

been part of the leadership discussion from early on, such as in books by Chris Argyris and by Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman,³ it has huge performance consequences and so deserves to be placed at center stage. Behaving with integrity represents a specific leadership challenge, one among several, and, with focused practice, evidence suggests that leaders and companies can enhance it. In this article you will find a few practical suggestions for enhancing your own behavioral integrity.

This report focuses on leaders' efforts to establish and maintain high standards in the healthcare, hospitality, banking, and aerospace industries, among others. The studies I present strongly suggest that behavioral integrity is an absolute necessity for establishing the high standards that are so critical to effective operation. In fact, a few studies show that trying to establish standards when you are not seen as living by your message can backfire and damage your company and your people. As a starting point, an early study of 76 matched hotels that I conducted found that managers' behavioral integrity accounted for over 12 percent of the variation in profitability between the higher and lower performing hotels.⁴ It seems reasonable to assert that modeling the message is a fundamental element of the integrity that I measured.

Why Modeling Is Necessary

Modeling works in at least three different ways. One way is called "social learning."⁵ As discussed by Albert Bandura, social learning involves people adopting attitudes by imitating others whom the learner admires. Whether we are mindful of the fact, employees use social learning as they observe their managers for cues about how best to behave. Leaders are constantly "on stage." Regardless of whether a leader intends to be teaching at a given moment, employees will notice and imitate the attitudes that are implicit in the leader's behavior.

Second, a leader's acting in alignment with stated values also builds trust, because employees learn that they can rely on the leader. Acting in a way that does not align with one's words tends to undermine trust, because employees often assume the worst when they perceive gaps. They may infer that the stated values are not sincerely held and are expressed only for show, or, worse, that the true underlying values are nefarious or totally self-serving. Trust is important because it supports cooperation and other behavior that supports

³ Chris Argyris, *Interpersonal Competence and Organizational Effectiveness* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1962); and Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1982).

⁴ Simons, op. cit.

⁵ Albert Bandura, "Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change." *Psychological Review*, Vol. 84 (1977), pp. 191-215.

the shared service mission. Because a leader often represents the company for employees, trust also makes it possible for employees to identify with the larger organization. This identification causes them to want to act on the company's behalf in providing excellent service, living up to the company's espoused principles, and generally in acting in the company's best interests.

A third mechanism relating to modeling that we are only recently starting to study is the fact that a leader who is utterly consistent in demonstrating stated standards and principles sends no mixed messages. Where employees see inconsistencies they get a jumbled picture of what exactly is expected of them. Where leaders' words and actions line up transparently and consistently, on the other hand, employees get a clearer picture of management's expectations. As a result they are more likely to deliver and so to meet those standards and expectations.

Modeling Safety Protocols in Hospitals

Let's look at how leaders' behavioral integrity influences hospital operations. Healthcare workers confront two potentially conflicting standards—they must be both effective and efficient in treating patients. Thus, line personnel are asked to minimize errors, to quickly and efficiently serve many patients, to respond to idiosyncratic requests for service, and to exercise their best clinical judgment to optimize patient outcomes. All of these elements are important, but sometimes they pull line employees in different directions. Prioritizing them is another one of those things that is easy in concept but far more challenging in daily practice.

The principle of leadership integrity provides guidance in setting those priorities, in the form of safety protocols. Two different hospital systems worked with a team of scholars including myself, as they came to understand the central importance of modeling for safety standards. Nursing administrators face a double bind with regard to the enforcement of safety protocols, because the protocols slow workers down even as they ensure appropriate patient care. Thus, workers face the prospect of being speedy (which is a goal) but violating the protocols (which is a problem), or following the protocols (which is a goal) and being slow (which can be a problem).

Administrators also face an awkward choice. They can enforce protocols by punishing violators and so conveying the depth of the hospital's commitment to safety, but this invites workers to underreport errors that might result in penalties. Underreporting, however, means that neither the workers nor the hospital have the chance to identify the source of error or to improve the protocols themselves. The revision of Ebola protocols in the U.S. in mid-October 2014, which occurred after transmission of the disease, demonstrates the importance of identifying errors and correcting them in an atmosphere of

support rather than disciplinary procedures.⁶ The challenge, then, is how to convey the hospital's deep commitment to protocols that maximize safety and minimize errors, albeit at the cost of speed, while also creating a climate that allows people to confess, discuss, and learn from their mistakes. As the two studies below demonstrate, behavioral integrity is a key to such communication.

In the first study, we surveyed 580 nurses in 54 departments at four Belgian hospitals. We asked those nurses about their managers' behavioral integrity specifically with regard to safety and safety protocols. We also asked about the extent to which the nurses recognize safety as a high priority for their department,⁷ and the extent to which they feel comfortable confessing and discussing mistakes.⁸ Six months later, we surveyed their head nurses to learn about the reported rate of treatment errors at each department.

We found that nurses' perception of their supervisors' behavioral integrity regarding safety affected their view of the team's priority for safety and their comfort in discussing mistakes—both of which, in turn, affected reported treatment errors. Behavioral integrity paradoxically sends both of the needed messages: namely, that safety is a high priority, and that discussion of—and thus learning about and preventing—treatment errors is important.⁹ In this way, management can address both immediate and long-term safety goals.

The second study examined a similar mechanism in four Midwestern U.S. hospitals. This time, the outcome of interest was occupational injuries rather than treatment errors. We surveyed 658 nurses three times at six-month intervals. By studying time-lagged survey data, where each link in the causal chain is measured several months after the previous link, we found supervisor behavioral integrity led to improved compliance with protocols and willingness to discuss errors, which led in turn to a reduced frequency and severity of occupational accidents and increased reporting accuracy. These findings provided further sup-

⁶ For example, see: Donald G. McNeil, Jr., "C.D.C. Issues New Guidelines for Ebola Care," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2014, p. A14 (www.nytimes.com/2014/10/21/us/cdc-issues-new-guidelines-for-ebola-care.html?_r=0; viewed October 22, 2014).

⁷ "Priority of Safety," as explained by: D. Zohar, "A group-level model of safety climate: Testing the effect of group climate on microtreatment errors in manufacturing jobs," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 85 (2000), pp. 587-596.

⁸ "Psychological safety," as discussed by: Amy Edmondson, "Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44 (1999), pp. 350-383.

⁹ Hannes Leroy, Bart Dierynck, Fredrik Anssel, Tony Simons, Jonathon Halbesleben, Deirdre McCoughey, Grant Savage, and Luc Sels, "Behavioral integrity for safety, priority of safety, psychological safety, and patient safety: A team-level study," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 97, No. 6 (2012), pp. 1273-1281

port for the proposed chain of events. We found that nurses' perceptions of their managers' behavioral integrity regarding safety caused them to feel more "psychologically safe" discussing and learning from potential mistakes. Those same perceptions cause nurses to more closely adhere to safety protocols and to minimize workarounds. We found that psychological safety and adherence to safety protocols in turn reduced accidents and improved reporting procedures.¹⁰

Practical Implication: If we can generalize from health-care to other industries, these studies suggest that one effective way to promote safety in the workplace is for managers to live by their message and be seen as doing so. Certainly, the same principle applies when a hotel or restaurant manager is seeking to promote food safety, excellent guest service, professionalism, collegiality, or ethical conduct. In a manager's carrying out of daily duties, he or she has many opportunities to model the behavior desired from line employees, and so to promote it. For example, the manager picks up a stray napkin from the floor. Any other course of action sends the wrong message. Hopefully, the manager seizes upon the opportunities to model proper behavior, and so successfully reinforces adherence to standards.

As a cautionary note, consistently modeling a desired set of behavioral standards becomes increasingly challenging as the number of standards—or espoused values—increases. In many workplaces I have seen the list of values become so long that the values cease to be useful as guides to behavior. It becomes difficult to keep track of them, and to keep them all constantly in mind. Given that a leader's modeling is critical to implementing a standard, a leader must pare down the list of standards, values or priorities to just a few—ideally between three and five—that he or she can consistently demonstrate.

The Perils of Hypocrisy

To leaders' sorrow, it is also true that we see negative effects when managers fail to live up to the principles they espouse. For example, a study of bank employees analyzed whether the impact of supervisory guidance—coaching about the best and worst ways to do the job—depends on the level of behavioral integrity attributed to the supervisor.¹¹ Once again, the question is whether the success of supervisors' efforts at coaching depends on the extent to which they are seen as having behavioral integrity. Using two separate

samples totaling 1,114 bank employees, the team found that effective coaching depends on modeling. Where supervisors are seen as having high behavioral integrity, their efforts at guidance served to increase employees' "citizenship behavior"—their willingness to go an extra mile to help coworkers on the job—and to decrease "deviance behavior"—destructive behaviors such as gossiping, shirking responsibility for errors, and stealing. Where employees see low behavioral integrity on the part of their supervisor, though, efforts at supervisory guidance tend to have the reverse effect. Employees respond to the apparent hypocrisy by reducing citizenship behaviors and increasing deviance behaviors.

Another study provides added insight into this mechanism, with a focus on ethical standards. In this study, my team looked at the concept of "ethical leadership," which is defined as leaders' attempts to shape the ethical climate of the department or company by talking about and rewarding ethical behavior.¹² We reasoned that the impact of such efforts would depend on the credibility of the leader who is trying to enhance the ethical climate, again by acting according to the promoted values and standards. We first asked employees to describe their managers' efforts at ethical leadership and their managers' behavioral integrity. We then asked managers in turn to evaluate the job performance and the citizenship behaviors of the employees who completed the survey rating their managers. We examined completed surveys from 255 matched employee-manager pairs in various U.S. companies, and found that ethical leadership—that is, encouraging ethical behavior—enhances employee job performance where the manager's behavioral integrity is high, and drives it down when behavioral integrity is low.

A similar pattern emerged in a sample of 307 matched employee-manager pairs from a major U.S. aerospace company. Leaders who espouse ethics enhance citizenship behaviors where the manager's behavioral integrity is high—and reduce them when behavioral integrity is low. We reason that efforts to enhance followers' ethical conduct, absent that leader's active embodiment of the spoken message, make the leader seem untrustworthy and hypocritical, thus reducing employees' motivation to perform and to go above and beyond formal job requirements.¹³

Practical Implication: In all of these studies, we see that the effectiveness of leaders' efforts to set standards of various kinds depends on behavioral integrity, and further

¹⁰ Jonathon Halbesleben, Hannes Leroy, Bart Dierynck, Tony Simons, Grant Savage, Deirdre McCoughey, and Matthew Leon, "Living up to safety values in health care: The effect of leader behavioral integrity on occupational safety," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2013), pp. 395-405.

¹¹ Brian Dineen, Roy Lewicki, and Ed Tomlinson, "Supervisory guidance and behavioral integrity: Relationships with employee citizenship and deviant behavior," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol 91, No. 3 (2006), pp. 622-635.

¹² M.E. Brown, L.K. Trevino, and D.A. Harrison, "Ethical Leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (2005), pp. 117-134.

¹³ James Avey, David Mayer, Tony Simons, and Michael Palanski, "The moderating impact of behavioral integrity on ethical leadership: 'Do as I say, not as I do,'" presented at national Academy of Management Conference 2014, Philadelphia, PA.

that such efforts made without “modeling the message” can be actively destructive. Given the potential of leadership efforts backfiring badly where followers perceive misalignment, leaders do well to choose carefully what few standards and values to promote consistently. Even with a pared-down list, though, standards will sometimes come into conflict with one another. For example, in a restaurant, efficiency and profitability can run up against food safety or customer service when stocks run low.

Even when managers who face conflicting priorities make the right choices, there is a danger of employees’ understanding the decision in terms of the value with which it is inconsistent rather than the one with which it is consistent. For example, the front desk agent who has to walk an overbooked guest might understand the practice as meaning that reliable service delivery is a low priority at the hotel. If such an interpretation causes employees to question their manager’s behavioral integrity, these studies suggest that the consequences can be dire. Therefore, a wise manager must discuss openly and, if possible, proactively those situations where key standards of behavior and espoused values might come into conflict with one another. In addition to discussing how you would reconcile such conflicts and how you would want the employees to do so, it’s important that employees see your decisions in terms of the values and

standards you uphold, especially where upholding one value means you cannot at the same time enact some other value that is also important.

Summary

The overall practical implication of this stream of research reinforces my point at the outset. A leader who hopes to set a behavioral standard or a value to guide employees must embody the message he or she hopes to convey. Leaders must apply their words honestly to an examination of their own behavior. Where actions serve to reinforce and affirm words, and leaders are modeling the behavior they desire to see in others, then there is a reasonable chance of successful implementation and positive outcomes. Where a leader slips—and we all slip from time to time, and have blind spots and miscommunications—where words and actions fail to align, or seem to fail, then efforts at promoting change may not only fail, they may backfire and have negative consequences in terms of employee performance and morale.

In closing, I grant that managing your own behavioral integrity, and so managing your personal credibility, is not at all an easy task. However, as the studies explained here demonstrate, this is an absolute necessity for excellent leadership—especially during turbulent times, and especially where you want to create change. ■

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