

Integrity

When we talk about integrity, we talk about a certain quality of character. This quality is both admirable and worth cultivating. But what is integrity actually? Although we recognize integrity when we encounter it, it is not easy to describe. What are those characteristics that we associate with a person of integrity?

Integrity begins by having our actions reflect our words. Did you ever encounter someone who through their actions sent out the message: “do as I say, not as I do”? In other words, they didn’t practice what they preached? How did that make you feel?

On the other hand, if you deal with someone who says what they mean and does what they say, how do you feel towards that person?

When people “walk the talk”, they earn our respect and create an atmosphere of trust and confidence. People with integrity are like a compass. We know that when we take out the compass to make a reading, that the needle will point north. We trust that it will show us the right direction. We regain our sense of orientation.



A professional squash player – Reuben Gonzolas – was noted for being a fair player. Once he was playing a match against the top rated player in the world. On match point, he hit the ball in the corner which was declared a winner by the referee – giving him the match. Gonzolas realized that his shot had actually just missed – and he called the ball out, giving the point to his opponent. He later lost the match. When asked why he had gone out of his way to change the official ruling, he said: “It was the only way to save my integrity.”

Are there times, when you need to save your integrity?

A person with integrity will attempt to honor - as much as is humanly possible - the commitments that they make. We all know that circumstances change and that sometimes commitments conflict. A person of integrity, however, will do what is in their power to remain true to their commitments.

If, for instance, I commit myself to taking care of an elderly parent, I will make sure that I re-order my schedule and my priorities in order to make that possible – even if keeping my commitment requires me to substantially change my lifestyle.



(the author with wife and father-in-law)

Finally, a person with integrity acts morally. They follow the maxim of “doing onto others as you would like them to do onto you”. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison, he was asked whether he hated white people and particularly the Afrikaners that had imprisoned him. After 27 years in prison, he could have held many grudges – he could have wanted revenge. Instead he replied, “no I don’t hate anyone, I hate racism”. With that message he was able to lead his country to reconciliation and to a peaceful transition.

At the level of an organization, integrity is about doing what is right regardless of the cost. The pharmaceutical company Merck was faced with an ethical issue. They had just developed a drug called Mectizan. This drug helped to cure ‘river blindness’, a disease that infected over a million people in tropical countries. ‘River blindness’ is caused by parasitic worms that swarm through the body tissue and eventually into the eyes, causing painful blindness. The drug was originally developed with the understanding that either international organizations or governments of countries where people were affected would pay for the drug. The people actually infected were usually too poor to pay for the drug themselves.

Once the drug was ready, it turned out that several governments did not fulfil their obligations and international organizations were too busy supporting the fight against much more widespread diseases. So here was Merck with a drug to cure a disease affecting a million people that was sitting in a warehouse instead of being used. What did Merck do? They decided to give the drug away for free to all who needed it. In order to make sure that it reached the affected population, they also became involved in the distribution efforts.

How can we build more integrity into our lives and into our organizations?

From a personal point of view, a starting point is self-knowledge. Part of integrity is being honest with yourself - accepting yourself for who you are and knowing what your strengths and limitations are.

Integrity can also be deepened just by some of the every day actions we take, as the following example shows: A father who was taking his children to the zoo, walked up to the ticket booth. Children 6 years old and under were allowed in free. He told the ticket person that his older son was seven. The ticket person replied – why did you tell me that? You could have saved yourself 5 €. I wouldn’t have known that your son wasn’t six years old. “Ah, said the father, but my son would have known.”



At Bunge, we strive to live with integrity. Ethical standards and living up to our commitments are essential for our work together and for our dealings with our customers. The question for each one of us to ask ourselves is:

‘How can you lead your life at work and at home with even greater integrity?’

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