



Integrity

By *Dianna M. Anelli*

Without it, nothing works.

Integrity. The word conjures up a host of thoughts and meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “the condition of having no part or element taken away or wanting; undivided or unbroken state; material wholeness, completeness, entirety.”

The second definition is “the state of being whole, entire or undiminished.” Merriam-Webster defines it similarly as “the quality of being honest and fair” and “the state of being complete or whole.” “Whole” is defined as “having all necessary parts: not lacking anything; not limited in any way; having all necessary parts, elements, or steps.” For example, when a ship’s hull lacks integrity, it takes on water, because the whole is compromised. It is not seaworthy.

The same can be said for the human condition. As humans, our integrity goes in and out all of the time. Indeed, integrity is always on its way out. As humans, our integrity exists in our word. When we keep our word, we are in integrity. When we break our word, we are out of integrity. When using the word “integrity” with regard to the words we speak, the promises we make, the first definition -- that involving morality or ethics -- can be excised from the definition. As humans, once we break our word--which, if we are honest, happens every single day--it often is not a statement as to our honesty or ethics. It is a condition in which we said that we would perform, and we have experienced a breakdown in performance. This may come in the form of failing to do a task in a timely manner, failing to do it in the manner in which it was meant to be done, failure to do it completely, or that there was an expectation that was not met.

With every integrity breach, there is a consequence. That is to say, there is an impact. The impact occurs in at least two ways. There is an impact to the promise breaker, and there is an impact on the person to whom the promise was made. The impact on the promise breaker often is the listening of her of those to whom the promise was made gets smaller. The promise breaker is viewed as unreliable. The impact on the individual to whom the promise was made often is an extra burden, which can come in a number of forms. The end result is that there is a separation in relationship between the promise breaker and the one to whom the promise is made. Often this starts with very small, seemingly minor occurrences, such as a failure to be on time.

Given that this happens so often in the human experience, what is one to do? Well, all is not lost. There is a restoration process. It is crucial that, once it goes out, integrity is

restored. Without integrity, nothing works. So how does this restoration occur? The first step is to acknowledge the integrity breach. As humans, we are loathe to do this. We think it makes us look weak, or bad, or, at least, we fail to look good. We want to sweep it under the rug, ignore it, or forget about it. But there is a separation between the promise breaker and the one to whom the promise was given that will remain without a restoration of integrity. Like a breach in the integrity of the hull of a ship, it must be addressed for the relationship to be restored.

The mere acknowledgment that one has not kept one’s word goes a long way to bridge the gap that the lack of integrity creates. When one acknowledges the impact on self of the integrity breach and the impact on the other, the gap lessens further. Finally, when one puts structures into place and tells the other person that structure to ensure that word is kept, the division between the two evaporates and integrity is restored.

So practically speaking, what does such a restoration process look like? Let’s take a situation where one is late for a meeting. It may look something like this: “I said I would do be here at 9 a.m. I did not appear until 9:15 a.m. I am out of integrity in this area. The impact on me is that I am embarrassed and I must rely on another to catch me up. The impact on you is that time is taken to catch me up, I have interrupted a discussion and you are wondering where I am and when I will get here. I will put an alarm on my clock to ensure that I timely arrive for future meetings or will be in communication if I will be late.”

When this restoration is done without explanation, blame, defensiveness, making one’s self or another wrong, the gap that occurs due to the breach of integrity disappears. The other person’s listening of the promise breaker enlarges, sometimes to a greater extent that existed before the breach. The point is, though, that there is nothing in the way of effective communication. And that goes a long way in relationship building.



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