Leading with integrity

Insights from three Leadership Conversations

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Contents

Chapter 1

What we mean by leading with integrity

Three stand-out propositions

1 **We should differentiate between personal integrity and organisational values,** because:

> **i** Integrity can only be possessed by individuals and can NOT be transferred to organisations
>
> **ii** Organisations adopt and own **values** that enable them to act with integrity. They can never "own" integrity because that is ours, and ours alone.

2 **Organisations are right to insist that "when we walk through their gates, we should adopt their values".**

> **i** Organisations are absolutely within their rights to insist that when we are working for them at any level, including that of CEO, we do so within their existing values framework.
>
> **ii** If we find ourselves unable to reconcile our personal integrity with the values of the organisation, we have two options: to persuade the organisation to change its values, or accept that we are working for the wrong organisation - and leave.

3 **Our commitment to acting with integrity should never free us from considering the likely impact of our actions on others.**

> **i** Integrity is not just about intention, it is also about impact – and if our behaviours have a negative impact on others we should judge ourselves harshly for that.
>
> **ii** If we "roll the dice", we're responsible for where they land.

Guide to these Insights

Leading with integrity –
what does it mean to you?

We all tend to use different language to describe what leading with integrity means to us:

- "Doing the right thing when no-one is looking"

- "Doing the right thing, even when it's really hard to do – and is not to my advantage"

- "Being my best self"

- "Remaining true to my purpose"

- "Being prepared to step into the ring and say no"

- "Being prepared to say 'Yes we can' and then asking 'But **should we?**'"

- "Never missing the opportunity to stand up and say, '**This** is what I value - and let me tell you **why**'".

Integrity and consistency

We often talk about leaders with integrity being seen to be "consistent". What do we mean by this?

- We **don't** mean consistency in terms of what they **do**, or what they want others to do

- We generally mean consistency in terms of the process of **internal** reflection that they go through before they take an important decision

- We know that they will ask themselves whether the decision can be **justified,** not just in a business sense but in a broader social and moral sense too

- We know that they need to be satisfied with the reasoning behind their decisions, as well as their **likely impact**, before pressing the green button

- We see their consistency as driven by their need to **"do the right thing"** as much as they can.

Hence the consistency of their **struggle** with all of the uncertainties and dilemmas when they ask themselves a question and quickly see that there is no single right answer.

Compromising our integrity

Do we ever compromise our integrity as leaders? Some have difficulty with this concept, whilst most of us accept this is unavoidable.

Occasionally compromising our integrity is "part of our humanity".

"Forgivable"

Some compromises are forgivable – e.g. telling a newly appointed Director who is a very nervous public speaker that his first presentation to the Board went down well, even though it was excruciating in parts.

Other compromises are a step too far – e.g. advising your Board that a certain decision would pose little risk for the business even though your Chief Finance Officer told you hours beforehand that she was seriously concerned about the likely financial consequences.

- In seeking to lead with integrity, we need to be careful to differentiate between compromises that are forgivable and those that are simply unacceptable.

Sharing the dilemmas

We know that the process of trying to avoid compromising our integrity involves us having to weigh up all sorts of possible dilemmas and then make a considered judgment call.

In modelling high integrity leadership, we should share some of these dilemmas more with close colleagues.

We don't serve anyone by pretending that decisions are any easier – and less risky – than we know them to be.

Avoiding compromises

Integrity and courage

So what is the best way to avoid compromising our integrity as much as possible?

In answering this question, one word comes up more often than any other: courage.

We need to show:

- The courage of our convictions

- The courage to do what we believe to be right, even though it might not do us any favours in a business sense

- The courage to pause sometimes, too, and make a point of asking the advice of a number of people who are likely to have different opinions, before we take a firm decision

- The courage to be able to say a recent decision of ours was almost certainly **wrong,** and we need to change tack – quickly!

"Quiet integrity"

In this sort of situation, we might well need to draw on our courage to handle the charge that we have been "inconsistent".

So long as we know that we have been **consistent in trying to stand in our integrity**, there is no need to rise to the challenge.

Our integrity is even stronger when we don't feel that we have to shout about it.

- "Quiet integrity" has so much more to commend it than integrity that is in any way brash or egotistical.

Integrity and "holding the discomfort"

There is another challenge associated with integrity that can require still greater courage on our part:

● This is the challenge to "hold the discomfort" by hanging on to some item of information that we know to be potentially quite explosive - and doing nothing with it.

Our initial instinct might be that we have no choice but to reveal all, on the basis that we would be compromising our integrity by withholding the truth.

Yet some more reflection on our part tells us that it would probably be best if the wider situation is allowed to play out without us being the one to throw in a "hand grenade" that is bound to cause considerable disturbance with all sorts of unpredictable consequences.

Knowing when to speak up – and hold back

How do we know when is the right time to speak up – and to hold back?

The answer is that we can't, in advance of being in a position to assess the impact of us becoming the bearer of some unexpected truth in relation to the particular circumstances of a particular situation.

Just as integrity is about our own personal "wholeness", so is the exercise of integrity about assessing the wholeness of any one situation - and being prepared to hold a high level of discomfort for longer than we would like to do.

Integrity and "pressing the pause button"

How much should leaders encourage a culture of questioning and challenge? Imagine for a minute that you have told your staff that as Chief Executive you look to them to exercise their own personal integrity in every aspect of their work, in line with the organisation's values of honesty and openness.

Someone asks you to give them an example of what you mean by this. So you say that you want them to have the right to **"press the pause button"** at any time if they feel that they're being asked to do something that would compromise their integrity in some way.

For example, suppose that your business produces toothpaste and the production team decides to reduce the amount of toothpaste that you sell consumers in your standard sized tube. The new design appears and in the eyes of some of your staff it seems to conceal this reduction in the volume of product.

Instead of saying "This was decided on high, so it's got nothing to do with us", one of your team takes you at your word and presses the pause button.

The "integrity challenge"

This triggers a quick turn-round review of the decision and a direct response to the "integrity challenge".

Everyone knows that if your decision is that they should press the green button again, they will need to comply with this - or consider their position.

Integrity

PAUSE

Integrity and empowerment

What this would do is focus on an individual's responsibility to their own sense of integrity as well as the organisation's wider values.

It would make personal integrity a real force for standard-setting at every level in the workplace.

High ambitions – and weak mechanisms

If someone's integrity tells them that the organisation is about to make a mistake and let your customers down, how much do you want to empower that individual? That's the question, surely.

Whenever we discuss empowerment, the ambitions are high and noble but the mechanisms for actually delivering it are pretty weak.

So why not give all employees some real "power" linked to their integrity and sense of personal responsibility?

If we really believe that our integrity should guide us as leaders, why shouldn't we want it to guide everyone who works as part of our wider staff team, too?

Reassuring staff

In truth, we know that as a leader you would need to reassure staff that it would not be instantly career-limiting to press the pause button on something.

They would have to have **complete faith in your integrity** to take the risk!

Integrity and vulnerability

At a number of Leadership Conversations we have discussed how vulnerable we think we should be as leaders.

Most of us favour the idea of leaders being prepared to be vulnerable, whilst some are wary of vulnerability because they associate it with "weakness".

Some others have experienced situations where leaders have used so-called vulnerability as a "power play" to distract attention from a shortcoming of theirs by trying to attract sympathy for themselves as victims of a situation beyond their control.

Vulnerability as a high trust behaviour

When we use the term vulnerability, we are talking about it as a high trust behaviour on the part of a leader, who is candid in saying something that could potentially be used against them and does so because their integrity tells them that this is the right thing to do.

This draws out yet again the crucial link between integrity and courage.

- It can take rather a lot of courage to let ourselves be vulnerable as leaders when we don't know what the consequences might be.

Triggering a breach of trust

In these situations, what helps to give us courage? More often than not, it is our sense that by saying nothing we might well be compromising our integrity.

An act of omission can easily become an abdication of responsibility that is so serious that it triggers a fundamental breach of trust from which there can be no return.

Integrity, trust and culture change

If there is one other key value that needs to be seen as sitting alongside integrity, it is surely trust:

- our **trust in ourselves** and our own integrity, as well as our trust in others and their sense of integrity.

Sometimes our integrity requires us to trust ourselves to hold back from judging a situation until we are truly in that situation and experiencing what it means for us, as it is happening.

At other times our integrity requires us to speak up almost without thinking, because something has just been said that we know to be wrong. In that moment, we feel obliged to right the wrong before another second goes past.

The significance of self-trust

It is important to acknowledge the significance of self-trust, in the way in which it enables high integrity leaders to swing from split second responses to some situations to considerably more measured – and potentially 'discomfort-holding' – responses to other situations.

A powerful workplace culture

If we think of **integrity** linked to **self-trust** and a heightened sense of **personal responsibility,** we have three components of what could be a very powerful workplace culture.

Taken together, they would make it possible for a CEO to forge a culture in which all staff are encouraged to have a real sense of their personal responsibility, linked to the importance that they attach to their own integrity – and high trust working across team boundaries.

Knowing "where the buck stops"

Some say that one of the differentiating features of a high integrity leader is their robust declaration of the principle that "the buck stops here".

So, if the business seriously under-performs and falls significantly short of the expectations that they have encouraged their Board to have, then some high integrity leaders would see themselves as **duty bound** to resign.

They have no desire to do so, but they see their hands as tied.

It's **a point of integrity,** no more and no less.

Accepting their responsibility – or "running away"?

In resigning, they would be making a very clear statement that as CEO they accept their personal responsibility for the business's under-performance.

By this very action they would be seeking to make it easier for their successor to start with a clean sheet as they take on the challenge of turning the business round.

Some others disagree fundamentally with this, characterising a resignation as "running away" and "doing the easy thing", when what they should be doing is committing themselves to stay and right the wrongs that took place under their leadership.

Integrity and accountability

Leaders take their own decisions about what sort of approach would be right in a situation where their organisation has failed to achieve its key objectives.

The first option of resignation would pose some real risks to the business, especially if it took so long for a worthy successor to take up the post that the business lost confidence in itself during the interregnum.

The second option of staying put and trying to turn things round can rather leave the issue of accountability hanging in the air, depending upon the scale of the business's under-performance.

Challenging others about their own accountabilities

If the Chief Executive Officer doesn't take responsibility for the overall performance of the business, how does this square with their Executive Directors being expected to see themselves as accountable for the part of the business that they lead?

Once the idea is out there of one rule for the boss and another rule for everyone else, values such as mutual trust and personal responsibility take a real hit.

Some argue that we shouldn't overly focus on the worst case scenario. What matters, they say, is making sure that the organisation is never in that position.

The simple fact is that a CEO who is **prepared to resign** if the overall business seriously under-performs should be in a really strong position to challenge their senior people about their own responsibilities for dealing with under-performance.

Constantly discussing what integrity MEANS

With this clarity of leadership, it becomes possible to follow this through at every level, so that:

- No-one promises any more than they can deliver, **as a point of integrity**

- No-one claims that they have done something well, when they think it's just okay, **as a point of integrity**

- No-one looks the other way when something goes wrong, **as a point of integrity**

- No-one hides from their responsibility for failure, and for learning from failure, **as a point of integrity**.

Unless these principles are argued for at every stage of a business's development, there is always a danger that pragmatism will take over remarkably quickly – and with it, day-to-day compromises to integrity will become accepted as a natural part of the business cycle.

This is why it's so important that the CEO makes a point of explaining time and again:

- why integrity and personal responsibility matter so much to them and **what they mean** in terms of day-to-day relationships within and between teams.

My word is MY bond

In drawing this Note to a conclusion, it is worth recalling the three words that have been the motto of the London Stock Exchange since the late 18th Century: *Dictum Meum Pactum*.

Some of us think there is great significance in the **personalisation** of this undertaking.

It was an offering on the part of every individual working in the London Stock Exchange that attached real significance to their personal word.

It said "my word is my bond". **It did not say "our word is our bond".**

Protecting "corporate reputation"

If we think of all of the corporate scandals that we have all lived through over a considerable number of years, what was the justification that various Chairs and Chief Executives gave in their resignation statements for the breach of trust that they were a party to in one way or another?

That they did what they did (or in many cases did not do) because of their concern to protect their "corporate reputation".

Time and again, these two words "corporate reputation" have been used to justify all sorts of failures of leadership.

This is why the debate about who owns integrity is so incredibly important.

"My word is my bond"

"Corporate integrity" - a step too far

Some people like to talk about corporate integrity, and indeed during this Leadership Conversation we found ourselves using this phrase a few times.

Then we checked ourselves.

No, don't let's say that, it is a step too far.

Once we legitimise the notion of corporate integrity, it's not far off from saying that corporate integrity offers some sort of cover for doing whatever we need to do to protect corporate reputation.

After all, the body whose reputation we're trying to protect is the body that owns this "integrity".

Abdicating personal responsibility

Once we're talking in these terms, it becomes much easier to justify leadership behaviours that are actually abdications of personal responsibility:

- Such as Chairs and Non-Executive Directors not asking their Executive Directors certain questions because they are pretty sure that they know what the answers will be - and they need not to be told them in the Boardroom if they are to pretend that they don't know

- And Chief Executives of certain global charities not saying anything about the unlawful behaviours of certain senior members of staff who left their organisation with Non-Disclosure Agreements and then went on to repeat these behaviours in senior positions in other charities.

We can't "sub-contract" our integrity

Hence the importance of insisting on the personalisation of integrity. Organisations and teams can and should act with integrity.

But integrity is ours, and **ours alone.**

We can't "sub-contract" it to our organisation, however keen we might be on the organisation.

So when an individual, be that the CEO or a part-time member of staff who has just joined the organisation, gives their word that they will do something, that's a big deal.

Because their word is their bond.

Taking responsibility

If a leader breaks their word, they need a seriously good reason for this.

And if they break their word without offering any sort of reason, they have almost certainly compromised their personal integrity.

On the other hand, if they volunteer the fact that for certain reasons they have been **unable to keep their word** in the way that they hoped to do, that's different.

They have taken responsibility and now it's up for discussion.

No
sub-contracting here

Leading without a pre-determined script

Leading with integrity is all about leading without any sort of pre-determined script, or often any sense of certainty that we are necessarily doing the right thing.

In so many ways, doing the right thing is all about **seeking** to do the right thing.

It is about having the **ambition** to do that which is right for our organisation in fulfilling its wider purpose and also that which is right according to our own sense of integrity.

"I'm not going there"

In those moments when there seems to be a clash between our own integrity and the interests of our organisation, we acknowledge this - and then seek the advice of others about the best way of managing this tension.

Integrity is about having the ability to say, very clearly, that we will not knowingly compromise our integrity on the basis that this is somehow "good" for the organisation.

If we feel that we're under pressure to act in a way that breaches our integrity, we are relaxed and firm in saying very clearly *"I'm not going there"*.

"No way"

"Don't put down your own moral compass"

To support us with this, **wouldn't it be good** if more organisations were to be more explicit in saying to their people:

- *"Don't put down your own moral compass in favour of one that you expect us to provide. That is not our role.*

  Indeed, the longer you remain in this organisation the keener we hope your sense of personal integrity will become.

  *It is the **combined impact** of the sense of integrity of everyone working in and for this organisation that will determine the sort of business that we are."*

How great for a Chief Executive to say this to their top team and for the team to say it to all of their respective teams.

And should anyone question the significance of this undertaking from the top down, how good would it be to hear the words:

- *"Of course this is vital. I give you my word.*

  *As you know, **my word is my bond**."*

Organisational values

accountability

culture change

consistency

pause button

discomfort

empowerment

courage

communication

personal responsibility

trust

Personal integrity

Chapter 2

Knowing when to take our stand

"*Aside from the flesh that clothes your bones, integrity is all you have.*"

"Without integrity, who are you? What are you for? It is actually all you have. So don't trade it, don't sell it cheap, don't push down your conscience when it's telling you an inconvenient truth. Act from your integrity. Because if you lose your integrity, you lose yourself."

Steve Drummond

Leadership Fellow and former Chief Executive of CO2e.com, a joint venture with Cantor Fitzgerald that ran the world's first online carbon trading platform.

Steve's team worked on the 101st floor of One World Trade Centre. His joint CEO and all but one of the team died on 9/11.

"*Building integrity is our best defence against future darkness.*

"*9/11 mirrored back to us our vulnerabilities as a society. We forever lost a sense of collective invulnerability that day. But rather than attempting to treat our vulnerabilities as deadly weaknesses, we need to own them collectively at every level, as building integrity is our best defence against future darkness.*

Our very vulnerability is the path to authentic connection – and that connection lead us to higher integrity in our decisions, our behaviours and our ability to see and experience others' perspectives. It's in those messy places that we as leaders can hone our empathy, our ethics and our moral compasses, and thus allow others to see and experience who we truly are."

Sarah Kling

International Leadership Fellow

"If you lose your integrity, you lose yourself"

This was a powerful phrase of Steve's, wasn't it.

As we discussed in the Conversation in the Quire, there are moments when we might have to pay a heavy price for not "losing ourselves".

We might find that we keep our integrity and lose our job instead.

In these moments, we need to draw on courage deep within our being to be able to act according to what our integrity tells us to do.

It's not ALWAYS "all or nothing"

At the same time, we need to be careful not to view integrity in terms of these "all or nothing" moments.

For many of us, the main times when our integrity is challenged can not be described as life-changing moments.

Rather, we tend to compromise our integrity in one of those many **"grey zones"** in life, when we don't really see ourselves as facing a fundamental decision that will determine the sort of person that we are.

So we let ourselves come up with an argument in our head (such as not wanting to upset someone else, or create an unnecessary "drama") to justify why we are not doing what we know to be the right thing.

"An inconvenient truth"

This is why, for so many of us, the threat to our integrity comes through lots of small compromises, when - to use another powerful phrase of Steve's - we **"push down our conscience"** because it's telling us "an inconvenient truth".

In these grey zones, vulnerability can help a lot

This is the real challenge that we need to engage with if we are to lead with high integrity.

Part of the answer as to **how** we might best engage with it comes in the quote from Sarah's speech.

Her argument was about how our vulnerability enables us to achieve a real **connection** with others that makes possible a dialogue about upholding our integrity in those many areas of our lives shaded grey.

Creating a "bridge"

Through making ourselves vulnerable, it becomes possible to create a "bridge" from which it is easier to challenge others in a non-confrontational way about the choices that they face, in what Sarah described as a "messy place".

We do so by sharing **why** we empathise with the option that would involve a certain compromise to their – and our – integrity.

From this starting point of empathy, we can then explain why we think this would be wrong.

Vulnerability builds trust

Instead of confronting them with the wrongness of their proposed action, we manage to **engage** with their line of thinking and explain why we are nevertheless drawn to a different conclusion.

It is this vulnerability that builds trust.

This trust then makes it so much easier for others to back off from a position that could have resulted in them losing another "small bit" of their integrity.

The quest for wholeness

How consistent are we?

At our previous Conversation on this theme we spent some time discussing the various meanings of integrity, one of which is "the state of being whole and undivided".

Reminding ourselves of this, we asked how much we seek to live our integrity as leaders in a way that is "whole" and **consistent** across our personal and professional lives as leaders.

Our instinct was to **want** to be consistent.

Yet as we opened up this discussion, we realised that there are fundamental differences in the ways in which we engage with our own integrity in our personal and professional lives.

Personal support and challenge groups

A number of us have personal support and challenge groups comprising close friends we have known well for years.

Sometimes we bring them together for a meal every few months or so, and at other times we ask for their advice on a one-to-one basis.

Many of us working in this way have invited and encouraged these close friends to be **tough** in the feedback that they give us.

They have a good instinct for how much radical candour we can take before we become defensive, and we know how tough we can expect each of them to be with us.

Most important, perhaps, we all know that any criticism of us compromising our integrity as leaders is coming from close friends who we **invited** to be critical.

A key insight

In work situations it is very different, and it is this difference that gave rise to one of the key insights that came out of this Conversation.

In a work setting, we are bound to feel much more **threatened** if a colleague dares to challenge our integrity.

If such a challenge comes uninvited, it immediately raises the concern that they might have shared this with others before raising it with us.

Should such a challenge be allowed to stand, and become the "word on the street", then we know that it could potentially be career-limiting.

One of the greatest barriers in the way of our progression as a leader would be the idea that we have questionable integrity.

"Are WE doing the right thing?"

Hence our insight that whenever we want to challenge others at work about their integrity, **integrity is one of the last words that we should use!**

Instead, any challenges about integrity in relationships at work should be set more in the context of *"Are WE doing the right thing?"*

This is sufficiently unthreatening to make it possible for us to say some tough things without others feeling pushed into a hyper defensive position.

If they still choose to interpret this as an attack on them personally, it is much easier to say, *"But my challenge was to **all of us**, myself included"*.

Integrity is one of the last words that we should use!

Initiating difficult conversations

To lead with integrity, we need to be able to initiate difficult conversations with colleagues at work in which we ask tough questions, such as:

- Are we too defensive - or self-aggrandising - in the ways in which we present ourselves to others?

- Are we sometimes too "economical with the truth", in the ways in which we present disappointing results and poor performance to our Board/ senior colleagues/ shareholders and customers?

- Do we really acknowledge a higher loyalty to the truth, in our dealings with each other and the outside world?

- What are those lasting values that we see as being at the heart of our working practices, and how do we engage with others when we see them breaching these values in some way?

Not putting ourselves on a pedestal

However courageous we might be, we can all have only so many difficult conversations.

Moreover, if we appear to appoint ourselves as the moral conscience of our team or organisation we are likely to create resentment.

We could so easily be seen as putting ourselves on a pedestal and appearing to regard ourselves as better than others, as we deem their behaviours to fall short in some way.

How can we avoid being seen as self-righteous and yet still manage to keep focused on promoting and modelling high integrity behaviours?

Time for the big idea!

In trying to answer this question we came up with our "big idea"!

As so often happens with big ideas, we used some familiar language from another part of our lives and moved it across to this part.

A good number of us were distinctly excited about the idea of taking this forward.

As you will see, it is capable of being adapted and customised in all sorts of ways.

Create a Mastermind group

The group's mission

- To mastermind a new strategy for us to behave and perform at our very best, through

  - **Asking** what behaviours we need to adopt towards each other to achieve higher levels of truthfulness and transparency to enable us to become a truly outstanding organisation

  - **Stress testing** our vision of this high integrity, high transparency culture in relation to our current culture and ways of working, asking what we would need to change to move significantly closer to this vision.

A protected zone for free thinking

The experience of being a part of this Mastermind group would need to feel **very different** from the experience of being part of one of those formal committees and planning groups that can make many leaders roll their eyes when the very phrase is mentioned.

The Mastermind group would be seen as non-bureaucratic and creative, and **fearless** in drawing out any "inconvenient truths".

Everyone invited to join the group would regard it – genuinely – as a zone for free thinking where just about anything can be said in the knowledge that it will be received positively.

Like all good Mastermind groups, the emphasis would be on peer-to-peer support and mentoring.

Everyone involved would feel a sense of shared purpose, as well as a common commitment to **being themselves.**

Six possible ground rules for your Mastermind group

❶

In this space, we are all equal

❷

We leave our egos outside the door

❸

Who said what is never shared with others

❹

We speak our truth to each other

❺

We never seek to impose our views on anyone else

❻

Whenever we are critical, we talk of "we" - not you or they

A catalyst for culture change

Stress testing your vision for tomorrow

A Mastermind group working along these lines could become a powerful catalyst for culture change, stress testing your vision for the future against the realities of today, as an organisation always committed to "doing the right thing".

Reaching out across the organisation

Such a group should be careful to reach out across the organisation and draw in the ideas of staff at all levels:

- Putting to them your vision for how you would like to behave towards each other in an organisation that always seeks to do the right thing, and

- Drawing out their candid views about what they regard as genuinely achievable.

Longer-term culture change

By the end of this stress-testing exercise, you should have:

- A shared understanding of how much stress your current culture can accommodate as you seek to move towards your shared vision

- Some powerful insights into the longer-term culture change that you need to promote to underpin your wider ambitions as a high integrity, high performing organisation.

A high integrity, high performing organisation

The best brains of the organisation
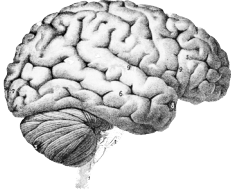
The Chief Executive must be seen to be personally committed to the success of the Mastermind group.

Before its first meeting, there needs to be an expectation that it will include the best brains of the organisation.

An informal think tank

For the Mastermind group to be truly radical and challenging, it needs to see itself as an **informal** think tank.

A Mastermind group should never be seen as a rival to formal decision-making processes.

This is why, after the group has done its work and disbanded, it should be the Chair who takes away the outcomes and shares their recommendations with the Board and top team.

Once they have decided which ones they wish to make their own, they need to take them forward with a sense of purpose and pace.

Raising the bar

If they truly lead a top performing organisation, they will be ready at some stage in the future to "raise the bar" that bit higher as an organisation that regards the integrity of its people as one of the keys to its success.

Time for another Mastermind group

Then it might well be time for another Mastermind group to stress test the organisation's latest ambitions against its established culture and working practices.

Knowing when to take our stand

A Mastermind group could do much to support an organisation in opening up difficult debates, in a relatively unthreatening way, about those behaviours that are compromising the integrity of individuals and detracting from the core values of the organisation.

At the same time, Mastermind groups won't spare us from our own responsibility as leaders for deciding whether to speak up in response to something happening that we believe to be wrong.

- Do we risk upsetting others by saying *"I think we might be about to do the wrong thing here"?*

- **Or** do we let the moment pass on the basis that it's not such a big deal, and life is too short to kick up a fuss every time we find ourselves in a situation where the standards of integrity being applied aren't quite as high as we would like them to be?

Asking the "pokey questions"

One Leadership Fellow said that we all have our own **"internal GPS tracker"** and if we paid more attention to that we would be in a better position to ask the "pokey questions" that are so important to flushing out questionable practices as soon as they present themselves.

This is why, in so many ways, the struggle for higher integrity organisations takes place in the "shades of grey".
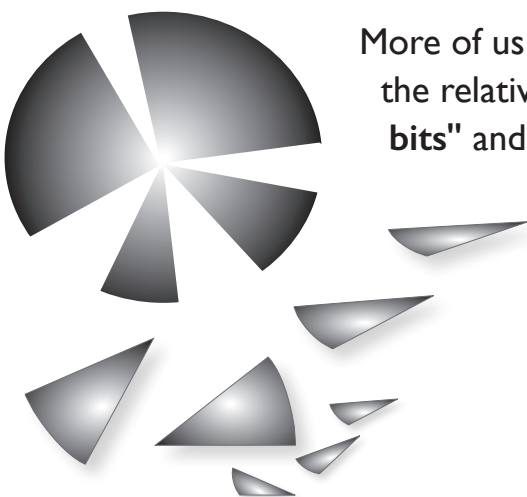
More of us need to take a stand more often in relation to the relatively small things that could well cost us "**small bits**" and **"crumbs"** of our integrity.

Courage mixed in with anger

Otherwise, if we say nothing and subsequently find ourselves confronted by some "big decision" that we have to oppose, it is no surprise that our courage will be mixed in with a large dose of anger.

Part of this anger might well stem from the fact that we failed to challenge at any time building up to that decision.

We are now unable to challenge from a clear position of principle, because we are already heavily compromised as a result of our own inaction on all those occasions when we said to ourselves,

- *"We'll let it go, it's not such a big deal".*

Postponing the day of reckoning

In these moments when we let something go, we might have been postponing the day of reckoning.

If and when that day comes, we could well find that the anger we are projecting onto others is anger also meant for **ourselves**.

For we know that we are now in a corner and feeling distinctly disempowered as a leader, because of the previous times when we failed to speak out.

No single right way

These issues are **hard** and there is no single right way of leading with integrity.

At the same time, this challenge of **knowing when to take our stand** seems to be the right one on which to end this note.

It is one that we all need to grapple with as part of our commitment to integrity in leadership.

Chapter 3

Doing the right thing: key behaviours and challenges

I tell it straight!

We all seem to agree on the importance of openness and transparency.

Yet in so many teams the language that we use with each other is ambiguous and coded.

We create elaborate "verbal dances", so that if someone disagrees with what we say it's easy to respond with the words,

- *"Oh no, I didn't mean that, you must have misunderstood me!"*

So it's a big deal if we make it a personal resolve to tell it straight!

Minimum code and **no** verbal dances.

Just the plain honest truth, delivered with generosity and clarity.

This then puts us in a position to say to anyone who comes out with some jargonistic gobbledygook,

"No need to give us any bull!

Tell us what you think in plain English."

Whenever we challenge others in this way, it can be very effective to say that they should **challenge us back** if they ever feel the same about us.

Just as we don't want to be on the receiving end of bull, we don't want to offer it up, either!

2 I never knowingly let a colleague fail

The shades of John Lewis make this more memorable, don't they!

One Leadership Fellow said that he agreed this behaviour with his leadership team a while ago and since then it has really made a difference.

Everyone knows that if they **volunteer** any sort of problem with an ongoing piece of work, they can take it for granted that the rest of the team will do what they can to help sort it out.

The idea of personal failure is off the agenda, so long as members of the team alert others to something going wrong **the minute it begins to go wrong**.

The team then has a shared resolve to sort out whatever problems need to be sorted out and learn whatever they can from the experience.

If any tough decisions need to be taken en route to minimise losses and change tack, they are all on board with the process and aware of the action that is being taken - and why.
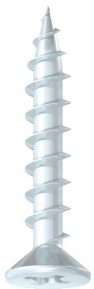
"I'm worried I'm about to screw up ..."

"We're here for you!"

3 I ask pokey questions

One of the strengths of the phrase "doing the right thing" is that it can be a good lead-in to a strong pokey question.

The key is that the language is all about "us" and "we":

- *"I'm just wondering whether we would be doing the right thing if we went down this road .... how can we justify using words in this draft press release that are almost certain to be misinterpreted?"*

Our style of language is inclusive and we sharpen up our question in a way that makes it as hard as possible for others to duck it.

One Leadership Fellow, who chairs a range of Boards, said that he has found one particular phrase really helpful for getting others to soften their position where he felt that they were over-arguing their case with the Board:

*"Can I get it right ... are you saying that **in your heart of hearts** you really believe this will achieve what you say?"*

The phrase "in your heart of hearts" creates a way for them to step back from an over-statement without a complete loss of face.

4 I'm always up for challenging my own assumptions

This is one of those principles that we always ask Leadership Fellows to sign up to at Conversations.

We stress the importance of **self-challenge** as part of our commitment to "connect not convince", to ensure that we don't find ourselves slipping back into what for many of us is an old habit of arguing for a position in order to 'win the room'.

This mindset is incredibly important if we are to behave in a way that reassures others about our overriding commitment to doing the right thing, rather than advancing any particular position or interest.

It is so **counter-cultural** in so many organisations that it isn't enough to adopt this as a mindset.

We need to be **seen** to be challenging **our own** assumptions on occasion, as well as *welcoming* challenge by others.

This is why it is really important to respond with a phrase such as "*I have been wondering about that myself*" whenever anyone challenges one of our assumptions.

*"I **must** keep my ego out of this! I clearly didn't think this through nearly enough ... "*

"I respect your challenge, it's very fair. Let me think about it ..."

5 I never undermine what's agreed in the room

This is another one of those behaviours that we agreed with feeling!

We have all been in meetings where something has been agreed in the room, and then within minutes of the meeting ending some team members are walking down the corridor telling each other that the decision is never going to be implemented - and their own teams will be furious when they get to hear about it!

There is no hint of them having any personal responsibility towards the decision that was taken without them having said one word against it in the room.

Whenever we discuss this sort of issue at a Leadership Conversation, we agree that it is up to the Chief Executive or whoever is leading the discussion in the room to insist that people express their personal views **before** a decision is taken.

Put up or shut up!

Once the decision has been taken, everyone who is a party to it has an equal responsibility to support its implementation, irrespective of the position they favoured during the discussion.

Even where the CEO fails to make this explicit, there is a responsibility on everyone at a certain level of leadership to embrace the principle of collective responsibility.

6 I assume that others want to do the right thing too

During this Conversation one Leadership Fellow told of how a senior colleague had recently taken a decision that he personally believed to be fundamentally wrong. With great passion, he explained to us why he thought it would be **so wrong**.

"So why not try and see this person and explain why you think they should rethink their decision?" we asked.

In the final session we invited Leadership Fellows to go on a **"personal leadership walk into the future"** and live the consequences of their new resolves to role-model integrity in leadership.

This particular Fellow got to his feet.

So we asked him to imagine that he had by now been to see his colleague and explained, with the full force of his personal authority and integrity, why it would be such a mistake to go ahead with his previous decision.

"What did he say?" we asked, rather hoping that he would be expecting to have triggered some sort of change of heart.

"Oh, he went ahead regardless", came the reply.

This moment gave us a real insight into the power of a self-fulfilling prophecy when it is set to negative!

To achieve the positive outcome that we want, we need to assume that others want to do the right thing, too.

If we anticipate failure, we shouldn't be surprised if that's the result!

7 How much of a people-pleaser am I?

In the final session of this Conversation, we were discussing how likely we all were to achieve the resolves that we had each adopted.

"*The real problem is*", said one Fellow, "*that I'm a people-pleaser.*"

A number of others immediately shook their heads in agreement, and we immediately saw what a problem this can be when we need to summon up our inner courage to do the right thing!

Once others tell us that their version of "doing the right thing" is different from ours, what does our inner people-pleaser start to do?

A bit of an inner fidget!

"*Ah well, we'd probably still be doing the right thing - it would just look a little different from what we had in mind!*"

So we need to beware our people-pleasing tendencies, and the ways in which they encourage us to "flex up" what we mean by 'the right thing to do'.

Of course, others might be right about what is the correct thing to do and we might be wrong.

We just need to make sure that we come to this conclusion without our people-pleaser pretending that we all agree when what we're actually doing is **rolling over**!

8 Are we prepared to be vulnerable, to keep off the pedestal?
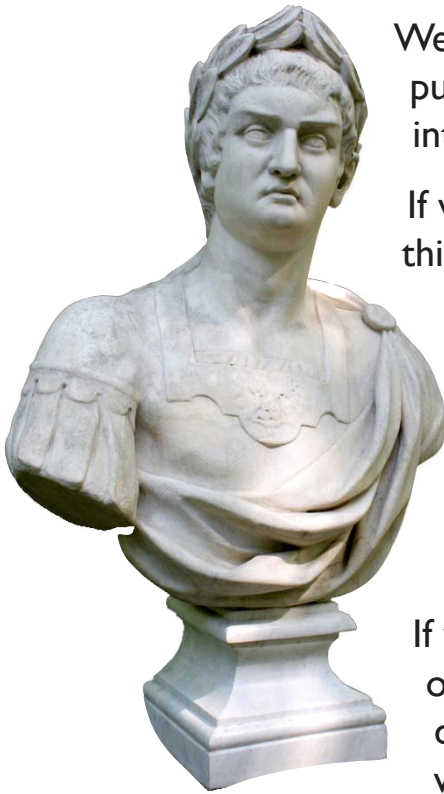
We all know that it can be fatal if we seem to be putting ourselves on a pedestal in any discussion about integrity.

If we have criticisms to make of others, we need to think hard both about the language that we use and the tone that we adopt.

The language of "doing the right thing" is so much less charged, emotionally, than the the word integrity, and has a lot going for it in situations where we fear that others are on the verge of compromising their own integrity.

If we want to be in a position to challenge others on this, we need to think about how we first demonstrate that **we ourselves** are regularly wrestling with integrity challenges.

How can we challenge anyone else on their integrity if we pretend that we never compromise our own?

This is why it is so important for leaders to share with close colleagues some of the ongoing compromises that they feel they have made to their integrity, and how they're acting to avoid them in future.

Whilst this does make us **vulnerable**, it is this that is so crucial to **trust-building** - and making it possible for others to reciprocate.

9 When will I know when my time is up?

In the final minutes of this Conversation, one powerful insight came through.

This was that in order to satisfy ourselves that we **are** acting within our integrity, we occasionally need to pause and ask:

- *is my current leadership role what I'm meant to be doing?*

The answer depends on what sort of life we want, which is why it's so important to pause and reflect before we answer our own question.

As one Fellow with a top global role in a 50,000 strong organisation said in answer to this question,

"I've been running for 30 years and part of me wants to stop. My worry is that if I slow down, what then?"

We can all keep running and running, and keep ourselves **so busy** that we don't have space to ask ourselves these tough questions.

Maybe we're running because we're fearful of what our answers might be.

- *What sort of life do I really want?*

- *How close is that to the life I have now?*

These are quite scary questions for many of us, which is why there is such a powerful link between integrity and courage.

Courage is vital to so many aspects of leadership, not least the **self-leadership** that is called for when it is time for us to move on in our lives to whatever the next stage might be.

10 How much am I up for renegotiating my boundaries?

We had some discussion about the boundaries that we have with others and the extent to which we are responsible for establishing and protecting our own boundaries.

We also recognised that we only need modest boundaries in our most special relationships in life where we can take the integrity of the other person for granted in the same way that we take our own quest for integrity for granted.

Where we feel that the integrity of others is in any way questionable, we need higher boundaries.

We also need to be that bit more vigilant about **not** taking on their "stuff" and making it our own.

For any of us, it would be a great challenge to reflect on how much more we need to **vary our boundaries** with colleagues at work, to reflect the integrity and vulnerability inherent to these individual relationships.

It is so important to appreciate those relationships where integrity and trust are so high that boundaries are already very low, and becoming **lower still.**

The higher the integrity and trust, the lower the boundary can be

Losing fewer morsels of our integrity

It is striking how this theme of boundary-setting came to the fore at the end of this third Leadership Conversation on integrity.

At our first Conversation we had agreed that our integrity is deeply personal to each of us and can not be sub-contracted to our employer or indeed anyone else.

It it **ours**, and ours alone to preserve and protect.

At our second Conversation we had recognised that for most of us the main challenges to our integrity come through **small and forgivable compromises** on our part.

They can occur on a weekly - and sometimes daily - basis, when we let a tricky moment pass or go along with a slight rewriting of the truth, and in that instant lose a "crumb" of our integrity.

These tiny crumbs and morsels add up over time. They end up costing us **chunks** of our integrity - just as the efforts of a small mouse nibbling away at a piece of cheese end up taking out whole chunks!

So it was that at this third Conversation we recognised the importance of setting **higher boundaries for some relationships than others**, if we are to model high integrity leadership and not let go of some of our integrity.

In order to vary the boundaries between ourselves and others, we need to be thoughtful in assessing their integrity as well as being ready to step forward as leaders when we find ourselves at risk of compromising our own.

This requires greater **courage** than we often recognise.

This interplay between ***integrity, courage and boundary-setting** provides a powerful agenda to which we will return at a future Leadership Conversation.*