Integrity:
The Foundation of Leadership

Hale C. VanKoughnett
U.S. Department of State

The U.S. government, military, and private sector all devote great resources to leadership training in an effort to create better leaders for their organizations. For example, the U.S. military services include a leadership component or course in their war college programs, and the Department of State requires Foreign Service Officers to take a leadership course at the entry, mid, and senior levels in order to be eligible for promotion. Private sector motivational speakers who speak about leadership abound. While most experts and trainers in the fields of leadership and management agree that leadership cannot be taught, it can be learned. Leadership courses are a great way to solve this dilemma, by gathering future and current leaders together to study and discuss successful historical figures from the worlds of politics, diplomacy, military, and business, among others. Whether one is a student arguing over case studies in a leadership classroom, or an employee simply endeavoring to better him or herself through observation while on the job, we can all emulate the best qualities of successful leaders. But we need to be equally mindful of the lessons to be learned from unsuccessful leaders and the actions that brought their downfall or the failure of their mission or organization.

The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within /luce.nt/ are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense or any other branch or agency of the U.S. Government.

What, then, does one need to look for when studying or observing leaders? An ideal leader comprises numerous character traits and skills including vision, decisiveness, experience, wisdom, "people skills," ability to communicate a message, luck and timing. The essential elements of leadership have been debated and studied for decades. Our understanding of what makes a person a good senior leader, commander, or CEO has evolved over the past 100 years, from Great Man theories to recent cognitive approaches. These widely varying perspectives suggest that no one characteristic can be definitively pinpointed as the most important. My own opinion is that personal integrity is the critical trait on which all others rest. A successful leader must possess and clearly demonstrate integrity in order to maintain the respect, trust, and performance of subordinates. Without integrity, all else deteriorates despite other positive characteristics the leader may have. Like a seemingly solid house constructed on a sinkhole, the organization—whether a military unit, an embassy, a private business, a religious body, and so on—will eventually collapse, no matter how watertight the roof or how glistening the paint job.

Integrity to me means adherence to a code of moral and ethical principles; it is the quality of being honest and possessing a true moral compass and a sense of selflessness that puts the organization above the leader at the helm. Throughout history there have been politicians, military commanders, and executives who possessed integrity and succeeded, and those who possessed it and failed. Conversely, there have been leaders who lacked integrity and still managed to succeed, and many who lacked it and failed. Like any other trait one can identify, integrity may not be an absolute prerequisite for success, but its absence from a leader's character exposes the individual and the organization to more danger. Leaders, therefore, need to demand integrity from their staff, supervisors, and colleagues—and most important, from themselves—or they risk stepping onto a slippery slope.

To be sure, one cannot empirically measure how much integrity a person possesses, if any. Even so, it is possible to look for patterns among leaders and learn from their actions. For example, Nelson Mandela suffered long years in prison without losing sight of his goal of ending apartheid in South Africa. He is of interest here not because of his ultimate success or steadfast refusal to compromise on his positions, but because he endured as a revered leader of a movement, and eventually of a country, and his ethics and morals were beyond reproach. For five decades he has maintained an unsullied image, allowing his followers to continue to believe in him.

Closer to home is the case of Colin Powell. On his first day as Secretary of State, a crowd in the Department of State main lobby gave him an unprecedented welcome. This greeting was because of his status as a war hero and respected leader. During his tenure at State, he was sidelined from White House decision making concerning the Iraq War. Some believe that Powell surrendered his integrity when he did not make a stronger case against invasion—or resign—rather than support a position with which he did not agree. One can also posit that he was either loyally supporting his Commander in Chief or attempting to remain on the inside to influence policy. But no matter how one feels about his actions regarding Iraq, it would be very difficult to argue that Powell proceeded with an eye toward personal gain. I, therefore, do not believe that this incident calls into question his integrity. Powell's emphasis on leadership, training, increased staffing, and accountability made him a respected figure at State long after he last passed through the lobby of the Harry S. Truman Building.

Mandela, Powell, and so many other modern day leaders were successful because they brought together many of the positive qualities identified by experts as common to great men and women. But even more important, Mandela, Powell, and other leaders embodied personal and

professional integrity, qualities that cemented their reputations and fortified their followers. Think, for a moment, what would have happened if either Mandela or Powell had been involved in a serious personal scandal during his public career or even after its conclusion. If Colin Powell were discovered to have falsified expense vouchers, his actions would have cast a shadow over his achievements, his longtime supporters would have felt betrayed, and his detractors might have claimed evidence of the hypocrisy that they had suspected all along. His defenders would have been muted, unable to convince anyone that his record on balance was positive.

More food for thought is what would have happened to the organizations Powell led if his hypothetical ethical or legal infractions would have been known only to a close circle of subordinates. The individuals who might have learned of these hypothetical violations would have certainly faced personal dilemmas. Would they have reported him? Would they have lost respect for him but continue working in silence, either ignoring the evidence or making excuses to themselves? To remain silent would have damaged their own integrity. Or would they have completely abandoned their integrity by taking advantage of the situation, falsifying their own claims, and perhaps expanding into other unprofessional, unethical, or illegal activities? It would have been easy for them to rationalize: "The boss is doing it and getting away with it, and anyway, if he catches me, I've got plenty of dirt on him." Whichever path the individual would have chosen to take, the leader's dishonesty would have, at a minimum, caused morale problems and at worst would have encouraged within the office rampant illegalities and a breakdown in the organization.

These unfortunate situations occur at all levels and in all fields. One of the most prominent recent cases is that of General David Petraeus's extramarital affair. The important point of the Petraeus situation is the unhealthy environment he may have bred within the organization he led. Until word of the extramarital affair was made public, Petraeus was one of the most highly respected four-star generals in the U.S. military. The American public had learned of his counterinsurgency successes in Iraq and high profile leadership in Afghanistan, believing he was a "model of integrity." The person at the top of any hierarchy must command respect from subordinates in order for them to carry out guidance faithfully. While some chinks in the armor are inevitable for any human, a grievous failure of personal judgment such as an extramarital affair has dangerous repercussions for the senior leader as well as for the organization. General Petraeus's entire career is now under scrutiny, with some questioning not only the access he granted to his biographer/mistress, but also the close relationship he enjoyed with a Tampa socialite and sponsor of official events, his counterinsurgency strategy, and even the Bronze Star he was awarded in Iraq.[1] Judging from reports in the news and comments on talk shows, his military colleagues and the nation he fought for have lost respect for him. If Petraeus was engaged in an extramarital affair while on active duty or as CIA Director, one has to consider what sort of negative effect it had on his subordinates, if they were aware of it, including repercussions for national security. Although these points are hypothetical, they are instructive in making us see the potential dangers in cases where leadership integrity has dissolved. Some might argue that General Petraeus's affair did not affect his job performance, which may be true, but the indiscretion created a situation in which there was potential for disintegration of morale, ethics, and performance of the organization.

In a bit of high irony, Petraeus himself recognized the crucial role that a leader has in shaping the ethics and morals of an organization. In a 2006 essay on counterinsurgency successes, Petraeus enumerated fourteen "Observations from Soldiering in Iraq." He highlighted the "tremendous importance" of the last of these tasks:

> Setting the right tone and communicating that tone to his subordinate leaders and troopers are absolutely critical for every leader at every level…
>
> …Setting the right tone ethically is another hugely important task. If leaders fail to get this right, winking at the mistreatment of detainees or at manhandling of citizens, for example, the result can be a sense in the unit that "anything goes." Nothing can be more destructive in an element than such a sense.[2]

Petraeus, in fact, implied that the leader must be beyond reproach and hold himself to a higher standard in order to serve as a model for subordinates. And while General Petraeus's examples above concern shaping the actions of troops in the field, a leader can just as easily set a destructive tone that sends an office into a slide—for example, by falsifying vouchers—carrying on an extramarital affair, or permitting a culture of racism or sexism to exist. My intention is not to hoist General Petraeus by his own petard, but to point out that one of our most respected modern day military leaders understood the critical importance of the chief's responsibility to set the tone in order to maintain the cohesiveness and performance of an organization, and yet despite teaching that lesson, he underwent excruciating public examination for his own violation of that "critical task."

Senior leaders must also recognize that behavior that may have been acceptable, or at least ignored, a few decades ago can be front page news today. Dwight Eisenhower may have engaged in an extramarital affair longer than General Petraeus did, and many people within his circle would have been aware (probably even journalists), yet he was elected president with no discussion of his alleged behavior. President John F. Kennedy may have had more extramarital indiscretions than President Bill Clinton, yet President Clinton was impeached while President Kennedy's rumored activities were never publicly revealed during his presidency. Two factors are responsible for the shift in the outlook and standards of American society. First, Americans in the post-Vietnam and Watergate years are more questioning and eager to look for foibles in their leaders, aided by willing journalists. Second, the Information Age has made it easier to uncover salacious personal faults and share the facts, or at least opinions, about what a person has done. Politicians and senior leaders' lives must have been easier before email trails, Twitter photos, and blog rumors became traps for their indiscretions.

My own experience as a State Department Consular Officer affirms the theory that of the various traits that a successful senior leader should possess, integrity is the most critical. Consular officers, with their responsibility to issue and deny visas, often become local celebrities in many parts of the world—after all, everyone wants to see Disneyland, visit family, study, or work in the United States—and the consular officer holds the key to getting there. Many foreign societies operate on a "who you know basis," and people are accustomed to paying bribes or exchanging favors, which can create unsettling dilemmas for visa officers. Because they are thrust into the role of making life changing decisions for hundreds of visa applicants each day, the officers on the visa line need to be well-trained and receive constant oversight from managers to ensure that their decisions are above board and are not influenced by outside factors. These rules apply equally to practices outside the consular section, such as government contracting and hiring.

Equally important to sound managerial review, senior leaders must set the tone in the office. Any appearance of impropriety, such as a consular manager receiving gifts from a visa applicant or immigration attorney, can damage the office. A close relationship with an outsider who has an interest in the outcome of visa decisions (or contracting, hiring, etc.) will appear suspect if

that relationship is used by any party, inside or outside the organization, to influence the normal process. One cannot motivate or instill values in an office if subordinates do not trust their leader. As with the discussion of the Petraeus case, if a leader is not firm in setting the tone and exhibiting the utmost integrity, there is a danger of a breakdown within the organization. In the visa world in which I work, that means fraud, bribery, violations of immigration law, and even risks to security if a visa is issued to an unqualified or watch-listed applicant. Senior leaders must therefore demonstrate solid integrity and lead by example, not leaving any gray areas that can be misinterpreted or taken advantage of by subordinates.

The question we are left with is how to inculcate integrity if it is not already part of a leader's character. Keeping in mind that nagging but accurate aphorism, "Leadership cannot be taught, but it can be learned," the best course of action is to emphasize the study of a wide range of leaders either in leadership courses or on one's own initiative. In addition to studying successful leaders like Mandela, Powell, Lincoln, and Thatcher, we should also investigate men and woman in positions of power who ultimately failed due to their paucity of integrity. We have much to learn from cautionary tales of negative role models. Most leadership studies focus on the positive traits that are found in successful leaders or highlight how they succeeded despite their flaws. Current and future leaders need to delve into the histories of failed leaders as well, to see where leaders went wrong and caused their subordinates to lose faith in them, destroying the foundation and causing the organization to collapse onto itself. Sadly, examples abound in all fields: embassy officers who have been convicted of taking bribes, Enron CEO Kenneth Lay, Brigadier General Janis Karpinski of Abu Ghraib notoriety, cycling team captain Lance Armstrong, and President Richard Nixon are but a few whose downfalls should be studied for their unpleasant but important lessons.

---

[1] Geoffrey Ingersoll, "Petraeus Allegedly Earned A Bronze Star For Combat Valor 'Without Firing his Rifle,'" *Business Insider*, November 16, 2012, http://www.businessinsider.com/patraeus-allegedly-earned-a-bronze-star-for-combat-valor-without-firing-his-rifle-2012-11

[2] Lt. Gen. David H. Petraeus, "Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq," *Military Review*, January-February 2006, pp. 2-12.