



LISTEN UP!

Character matters!

Why “LISTEN UP” about character? Today’s most sought-after job perk is integrity. That’s right! Corporate integrity is at the top of employee “wish lists” as they look for first or new jobs. How important is it to earn employees’ trust? Read on!

Achieving short-term results doesn’t require great leadership. Those kinds of results are easy to get. You can threaten us, pay us more, entice us with contests, manipulate the politics, or trick us in some way. But for us to follow you, long term, our number one requirement is that you be trustworthy. It’s even more important than having a great vision, being a great communicator, or being innovative, wise, courageous, inspiring, intelligent, or any other trait you can name.

The first question every person on our team asks is, “Do I trust my boss and the other members of management?” If the answer is “no”, then we start looking for someone else to follow – someone we *can* trust. This trust issue is a big deal. It’s a by-product of your integrity.

Without integrity, you can never develop trust. Without trust, you will never develop people. Without developing people, you will never maintain a following. And without followers, you have no one to lead. You see, it all begins with integrity.

Okay, so maybe you're thinking: "This is too easy. If I have anything, it's integrity." Most people feel that way. But you may not realize that, far too often, there's a gap between what you think integrity is and what we employees judge your integrity to be.




In our day-to-day experiences, integrity is questioned so frequently that many of us have become callused. In some of our meetings, we've discussed many of the integrity lapses we see in the newspaper almost every day. For 18 months, we talked about the President and wondered how he could lie when he knew the truth would eventually be exposed. In Dallas, the superintendent of schools embezzled \$16,000 worth of furniture and lost her \$200,000-a-year job. We agreed it was almost unbelievable for her to risk everything she had worked for all of her life, for a mere \$16,000!

At one of our meetings, you mentioned that the City of Miami had 33% of its employees on worker's compensation or disability. You laughed when you shared that seven of the workers were out because of paper cuts, of all things.

So we've talked a lot about the integrity of others, but you have never asked us how we judge *your* integrity. That seems strange to us. The most important requirement for any leader is integrity, and we've never had that discussion!

Since we're discussing it now, we'll tell you how we judge your integrity. We don't judge it by major mistakes, like the ones reported in newspapers. But we *do* judge your integrity by what we see – every day.

When you criticize one of our co-workers in public, you lose our trust. When you encourage us to stretch the truth to get an order and say “we'll deal with it later,” we question your integrity. When you show favoritism, choose not to return phone calls, say you're out of the office when you are there, or say that you didn't receive a message when you did – all these instances take a toll on our trust in you. As your followers, our integrity questions to you are these:

-  “When is a lie small enough that it doesn't matter?”
-  “Is there a point when ‘small’ lies are okay but ‘big’ ones aren't?”
-  “If so, where is that point ... and how do we know when we cross the line?”

Here's OUR overall answer: No lie is so small that it doesn't matter. The way we see it,

when you sacrifice your
integrity, you erode your most precious
leadership possession.

Losing your integrity is kind of like boiling a frog.

If you put a frog in boiling water, that frog will immediately realize that it's in danger and will jump out of the pot. But put that same frog in a pot of cold water on the stove and gradually increase the temperature until it boils, and it will remain in the pot, unaware of the subtle temperature changes until it, quite literally, boils to death.

Make sense? Well, that is how you lose your integrity with your team . . . one degree of dishonesty at a time. You see, there are no varying degrees of integrity. We judge whether you have integrity or not based on what we see. You're probably not even aware when you've lost our trust, maybe because you've become immune to the minor lies that have become a major problem for all of us.

As minor as those lies may seem, just remember that we do not forget your integrity mistakes.

We will forget and forgive any judgement error that you make, but integrity mistakes are forever.

So how can you earn our trust and protect your most important leadership tool? Try the following:

1. **Keep your promises.** You don't have to promise things just to make us feel good. We're more interested in being able to depend on what you promise than in feeling good. Just keep the promises you *do* make and we'll trust what you say.
2. **Speak out for what you think is important.** We can't read your mind. We don't know how you feel. If we have to guess how you feel about something, we may guess wrong. Please save us the trouble. Tell us how you feel and why. We'll respect you so much more.
3. **Err on the side of fairness.** Be fair to all of us. We know things are not always clearly right or wrong. Sometimes you have to make difficult decisions that affect many people. Sometimes those decisions include having to de-hire some of us. All we ask is that you be fair at all times – regardless of the type of decisions you have to make.
4. **Do what you say you are going to do.** Just let your “yes” be yes and your “no” mean no. When you tell us you're going to do something, we should be able to “consider it done.”

Are you surprised that we would put integrity this high on our list of priorities?

Most leaders think their followers put vision or communication or problem-solving skills first. Of course, all of those attributes are important, but what difference do they make if we don't trust you? Does it matter what vision you provide if we can't trust that it's best for all of us? Does it matter how well you communicate if we can't trust what you say? Does it matter how charismatic you are if only a handful of us are willing to follow you?

See, it all starts with your integrity. **We want you to be successful, just as we want success for ourselves.** But we will follow you only if you have earned our trust!

