



"Helping leaders and organizations  
live up to their promise."

# Connections

February 2007

www.integro-inc.com

Volume 6

## On "Living Up To Our Promise"

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Earlier in my career I witnessed first-hand the unraveling of a once promising technology company. It made some typical mistakes for a rapidly-growing start-up that it could have recovered from. Its greatest misstep, however, was misreporting of revenue, which, coupled with a few other ethically questionable practices led to its demise. It was sad of course that many (including me) lost their jobs and that investors and creditors lost a lot of money. Most unfortunate was that the company really had terrific products and terrific talent, but would never recover or fulfill the promise it once had. That episode was likely an early formative experience that influenced inTEgro's mission twenty-some years later of "helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise". "Living up to our promise" as organizations or leaders means attention to value and values, to doing things right and doing the right things, and to effectiveness and ethics. Over the course of serving as a consultant to organizations and their leaders for many years, I've made some observations about what it takes for leaders and organizations to live up to their promise: *Accountability, Identity, Authenticity and Alignment*. Taken together they compose the framework for inTEgro's *Leadership and Organizational Integrity Model*.

### *Accountability*

To be accountable and live up to our promise means *keeping* our promises - including those we make to ourselves like New Year's resolutions that might be breaking down about now. Organizations also typically make "resolutions" or promises around this time like increasing revenue, improving market share, reducing turnover and developing leaders; accountability means delivering on those promises as well. Living up to our promise and being fully accountable, however, includes not just delivering what we promised but also living up to our principles - how we commit to achieving our goals. As Walter Cronkite put it: "Success is more permanent when you achieve it without destroying your principles." The failed technology company may have written some vague statements about integrity or ethics, but I don't remember them, and especially as pressure increased it was readily important that those weren't the commitments that mattered most.

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**"If we don't stand for something,  
we'll fall for anything."**

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When we are fully accountable we are also responsible stewards - of our own gifts and talents as well as the time, talent and tangible resources of our team and organization. We also take responsibility for our decisions and actions, consider our impact on others and exercise responsible stewardship of environmental resources. Being accountable means measuring what matters, and living up to our promise or potential in the fullest sense means measuring more than just financial results. It means paying attention to the impact of our decisions and actions on others - perhaps across the world or in future generations, and assessing whether we are the kind of person or organization we profess or hope to be.

### *Identity*

Living up to our promise by living up to our principles implies that we know what our values are and what we stand for - a prerequisite for integrity. It's been said that "if we don't stand for something, we'll fall for anything;" it's easier to fudge ethically or to rationalize poor behavior if we haven't first committed to how we want to accomplish goals and who we want to be. Not only *ethical*, but *effective*, leaders and organizations need to know who they are and what they stand for. Identity issues are often at the heart of organizational dysfunction

- boards or board members that are not clear about the purpose or role of a board, for example, or an educational, health care or church institution that has lost site of its mission to teach, heal or minister because it is preoccupied with its *margin* over its *mission*. A clear, shared organizational identity includes clarity of mission, values, aims and strategies. Also, organizations and leaders with a healthy identity know their own strengths so they can leverage them, as well as their limitations and vulnerabilities.

### *Authenticity*

James A. Garfield said that "those who succeed best at public life are people who take the risk of standing by their convictions." When we know who we are and what we believe, integrity - living up to our promise - requires the courage to say what we believe and to act on our convictions, even at a cost. Examples I've witnessed include the sole dissenting voice of a board member standing up for what she believes is right, nurses reporting medication errors or bad physician behavior, the courage to confront disrespectful behavior with an otherwise top performer, and a public statement of support for an unpopular policy or leader.

Authentic leaders have convictions, but they are not afraid to hear dissenting, diverse or contrary points of view that may inform their version of "the truth" and possibly improve decisions. As Christopher Phillips said, "It is not enough to have the courage of your convictions, but you must also have the courage to have your convictions challenged." Authentic leaders and organizations cultivate "truth-telling" cultures that encourage saying what's hard, voicing contrary opinions and expressing concern about decisions or actions anywhere in the organization. Max DePree (Herman Miller, Inc.) believes that "the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality." Authentic leaders also help organizations and teams define reality and live up to their promise by directing attention to factors others may not see or acknowledge that could interfere with success or with being true to values. Just as the best sailors are those who sense a persistent wind shift first, our best leaders are those who first sense and then call attention to "inconvenient truths".

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People don't listen to us speak as much as they watch our feet. Perhaps most important to a leader's authenticity and credibility is that his "deed matches his creed" or that she "walks the talk." If we expect people to be accountable we must model accountability; if we expect people to live up to stated values we must model those values; if we expect people to be truthful even at a cost then we must do the same and reward such honesty.

### *Alignment*

To "integrate" - a word sharing the same root as "integrity", means to bring together - to create a whole from parts. Like a gifted orchestra conductor, a true leader is able to create a kind of "harmony", or unity, among sometimes disparate elements within a team or an organization and its stakeholders. Such a leader distinguishes "sameness" - where all are expected to be the same or march in step - from "unity", which thrives on diversity and different perspectives to create a value-added mix. Perhaps what we call *Alignment* in our integrity model should be the verb "Aligning" - living up to our promise every day means constantly integrating new information and realities with what we considered until then to be "truth", and with what Jim Collins in [From Good to Great](#) calls our *Core Ideology*. Mr. Collins refers to this "Yin-Yang" process of aligning new realities with core ideology as "adaptive mechanisms", and shares conclusive research demonstrating that organizations with that capacity create significantly greater market value over time.

To live up to our promise, we need to live up to our promise not only as "humans *doing*", but as "humans *being*". We need to avoid falling into those traps that may be evident if we're chastised at work for needing to "get a life". Leaders who demonstrate integrity - authentic leaders - seek alignment of who they are with who they are at work; they bring all of who they are to work and don't leave who they are at the door. Again - and this is easier said than done, integrity requires courage so that when we find we can no longer be who we are at work, we need to change what we're doing, with whom we're doing it or where we're working. I will always remember Warren Bennis describing strong leaders as "tapestries of intentions"; what a wonderful metaphor! The many different "threads" in a strong leader's life weave a pattern of purpose, values and intentions for all to see. If we

break it down, this "tapestry", or "integrity of design", is much of what constitutes what some simply call "charisma". Effective organizations that live up their promise are "tapestries of intentions" as well. Their "threads" include how and who they hire or fire, what kind of orientation and training people experience and how compensation is handled. The "pattern" of threads or intentions is less clear in dysfunctional organizations; there is no "integrity of design" - the threads do not reinforce the organizations' stated mission, values or aims but instead send mixed signals.

In his book *Integrity* (HarperPerennial, 1996), Stephen Carter expresses his belief that "integrity is perhaps the first among virtues that makes for good character; the rest of what we think matters very little if we lack essential integrity, the courage of our convictions." I would add that integrity is among the first virtues that make for healthy cultures and effective organizations. Integrity is fundamental for "living up to our promise" as leaders, organizations and communities; it deserves "top billing" as a critical discipline and way of operating that can help us navigate conflicting demands in an ever more complex world and markets.

On inTEgro's web page: [www.integro-inc.com](http://www.integro-inc.com) you will find sample questions from our *Organizational Integrity Survey* - designed as a preliminary audit of organizational integrity around these four dimensions: *Identity, Authenticity, Alignment* and *Accountability*. You will also find a free *Leadership Integrity Survey* to complete. For now, let us leave you with a few questions for reflection. Knowing that "truth" expands with others' feedback and input, you might want to use some of these questions as catalysts for conversation with others and within your organization or group:

#### *As a leader . . .*

- Have I tried to articulate any kind of life purpose or mission for myself?
- Have I written down any core values, principles or ideology that I use as daily guides for making decisions, acting and prioritizing?
- Would others say that I "walk my talk" by demonstrating consistency between what I say and what I do - between my "creed" and "deed"?
- Do I consistently exercise courage by speaking out and standing up for what I believe in?
- Even when I'm sure of something, do I listen to contrary opinions and remain open to alternate points of view?
- Am I myself at work, or does it seem like I need to "put on another face" or act significantly different at work than elsewhere?
- How good a steward am I of my own resources and the resources around me? To what degree do I consider the impact of my decisions and actions on others?
- Do I do what I say I will do? Do I consistently meet my commitments?

#### *Does my organization / group . . .*

- Have a clear mission / purpose statement that everyone knows and understands?
- Have a clear ideology - stated values or principles that everyone is clear about and that are reinforced by decisions and behavior in the group and especially by our leader(s)?
- Make it easy for "truth-telling" where people can speak up, share diverse opinions and have "courageous conversations?"
- Have "adaptive mechanisms" in place that facilitate questioning of assumptions, dialog, learning and growth?
- Reinforce stated values and desired culture by whom and how it hires, what people get rewarded for and what training is offered?
- Have a truly "balanced scorecard" - where there are not only financial or "bottom-line" measures but monitoring of things like quality-of-life, impact on the community / environment and ethical behavior?

**inTEgro, Inc. . . . partnering with clients since 1997 to help them live up to their promise and potential. We do this by:**

- **Helping organizations, their leaders and boards build strong cultures and define common goals, strategies and direction**
- **Providing organizations, teams and leaders with assessments and feedback to build on strengths, address limitations and grow**
- **Serving as catalysts for "courageous conversations" that help leaders, teams and organizations learn, resolve differences and address challenges effectively**
- **Coaching teams and leaders**

Visit our web site [www.integro-inc.com](http://www.integro-inc.com) for survey information, past newsletters, a "treasury" of quotes and more. Please direct inquiries or feedback on this article to Al Watts - [awatts@integro-inc.com](mailto:awatts@integro-inc.com) or (612) 827-2363.

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**Inside: *Living Up To Our Promise***