

NOURISHING INTEGRITY
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Continuing scandals cause us to question the current state of leadership. In both the public and private sectors, we get media reports of leaders who have failed, resulting in loss of public trust. Public servants, both officeholders and administrators, are expected to adhere to a certain standard of conduct. The role of public servant goes beyond treating everyone with respect and dignity; it goes beyond maintaining appropriate confidentiality, and it goes beyond complying with the statutes. The role of public servant must involve a commitment to public service for the benefit of the protection of society. This commitment can be thought of as some notion of social responsibility. It is a commitment to the protection of society, that looks beyond the mere earning of a livelihood and considers the effect on society of how we perform our work.

It is essential that public servants have an integrated philosophy by which they order their activity. That philosophy must include some notion of social responsibility. It must include some notion of the John Adams definition of virtue – a “positive passion for the public good.” And, in the current environment, that philosophy must also include some notion of organizational ethics and integrity. We used to think of integrity as an individual value. While that is still true, public servants, as well as corporate executives, must now think of integrity as an organizational value.

We all know that there are environments where corruption exists. An article in the Houston Chronicle on June 1, 2004 poses the riddle “How is the Texas public school system like Enron?”¹ The article discusses a chapter of a book that will be published later this year. Linda M. McNeil, head of Rice University’s Center for Education, describes in her book how both Enron and Texas schools structured a system of rewards and punishment for executives and staff based on “a single indicator of success.” McNeil argues that structuring a system of rewards and punishment based on a single indicator of success leads to corruption. For examples she chose Enron and the Texas public school system. She writes that Enron made the price of stock so important that the pressure to boost stock prices led to bad deals, exaggerating the prospects of new operations, establishing off-the-books entities and doing bad deals. McNeil posits that for Texas schools there is only one measure that counts—first the TAAS and now the TAKS test. We have read in various communities that school employees have falsified results of the tests by not counting certain scores—and by exempting poorly achieving students from taking the tests, classifying them as special ed. If it is possible that professionals can create an environment that leads to sacrificing fundamental values to achieve a goal, surely it is possible that we can create an environment that nurtures the fundamental values of our society.

¹ Rick Casey, *Texas Schools are like Enron*, Houston Chronicle, Local & State section, June 2, 2004.

Stratford Sherman, author and consultant in the area of leadership, technology and competitive response, argues that the bad behavior we are experiencing is the result of a “combination of factors, including increased reliance on rules, imprecise use of language, and a general coarsening of attitudes about ethics.”² But he then suggests that “the best of us create environments that nourish the integrity of others.”³ To create such an environment, he says we need to “start by acknowledging that personal integrity may not always produce behavior that others can easily accept...” (Who among us can be Ghandi or Mother Theresa?) [and then] we need to systematically uproot the habits of insincerity by promoting authenticity.⁴

What are some ways to promote authenticity? First, we must recognize that there is no one path that leaders follow to promote authenticity. Southwest Airlines Board Chairman, Herb Kelleher discussed building a corporate culture of commitment and performance. He says, “My best lesson in leadership came during my early days as a trial lawyer. Wanting to learn from the best, I went to see two of the most renowned litigators in San Antonio try cases. One sat there and never objected to anything, but was very gentle with witnesses and established a rapport with the jury. The other was an aggressive thundering hell-raiser. And both seemed to win every case. That’s when I realized that there are many different paths, not one right path.” Kelleher went on to say, “That’s true of leadership as well. People with different personalities, different approaches, different values succeed not because one set of values or practices is superior, but because their values and practices are genuine.”⁵

Well-known author James O’Toole, suggests that to exert moral leadership one needs to “simply adhere to a few common sense principles such as: obey the law; tell the truth; show respect for people; stick to the golden rule; primum non nocere (above all, do no harm); practice participation, not paternalism; always act when you bear responsibility (that is to say, take action when you have the capacity or resources to act, or when those nearby are in need and you are the only one who can help).”⁶

What does Sherman say about promoting authenticity? He states that the implementation of shared-value programs is often immediately stamped with insincerity when leaders do not embody the values they espouse—e.g. the tendency at investment banking firms to focus on transactions at the expense of employees...with expectations of 70-80 hour work weeks...leaving limited opportunity for

² Stratford Sherman, *Rethinking Integrity*, Leader to Leader, Spring 2003, p. 44.

³ Stratford Sherman, *Rethinking Integrity*, Leader to Leader, Spring 2003, p. 39.

⁴ Stratford Sherman, *Rethinking Integrity*, Leader to Leader, Spring 2003, p. 44.

⁵ Herb Kelleher, *A Culture of Commitment*, Leader to Leader, Spring 1997, p. 24.

⁶ *Moral Courage*, Best of Business, December 1985.

self-discovery so that the bankers can develop as leaders.

Sherman suggests a systematic uprooting of insincerity can be achieved by following these Eight Steps Toward Integrity: (1) Doing what we say we will do—keeping promises and meeting deadlines; (2) Doing the right thing—embodying our convictions—and accepting the consequences; (3) Taking responsibility—acknowledging our complete, sole responsibility for every one of our actions; (4) Supporting our own weight—supporting all the elements of our own lives, including being physically fit and financially sound; (5) Holistic thinking—appreciation of the big picture; (6) Respecting others—treating others with respect—even when they do not live up to our expectations; (7) Checking the mirror—when we err, pause for reflection—ask “Is this what I really want? Is this who I am?”; (8) Defining the rules and values—without consensus, personal integrity can lead dissenting individuals to subvert the group; among people sharing the same intentions, disagreements can help to refine and improve ideas for the benefit of all.⁷

Let’s look at some practical examples of a few of Sherman’s Eight Steps.

Holistic thinking...looking at the big picture... We must “look at the system.” Karl E. Weick, a professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, suggests that we must “look at the system,” rather than reacting to a narrow band of issues of interest in our specialty area.⁸ Weick uses a medical example of a man suffering severe chest pain who arrived at the hospital in respiratory failure. The cardiologist initiated a heparin drip and a lidocaine drip (routine measures for heart attacks), adding a pronestyl drip to address arrhythmia. The respiratory internist was concerned about bronchospasm and added a theophylline drip. On the second day, the gastroenterologist saw stress gastritis and ordered a Pepcid drip. The patient got worse and lost consciousness. His primary physician called a nephrology consultant who looked at the system and found that each of the 5 drips was in the standard solution and together they were diluting the blood sodium beyond the patient’s capacity to compensate, because of pain, congestive heart failure and renal failure. The separate bags made sense separately, but collectively the drips were compounding in an adverse manner. In our organizations, we must remind ourselves and others to “look at the system” instead of treating the issues in an adverse situation as separate problems.

Another of Sherman’s Eight Steps is: Doing the right thing—embodying our convictions—and accepting the consequences.... The Institute for Local Self Government, a nonprofit research arm of the League of California Cities, published a Handbook for the New Mayors Conference in April 2004. One of the sections examined two common types of ethical dilemmas and suggested some approaches

⁷ Stratford Sherman, *Rethinking Integrity*, Leader to Leader, Spring 2003, p. 45.

⁸ Karl Weick, *The System Imperative in Medical Error: Variety Mitigates Adversity*, journal article in progress, Spring 2004.

for solving them.⁹ One of them is the situation where doing the right thing comes at a significant personal cost to you or your public agency—the Institute says, “The bottom line is that being ethical means doing the right thing for the entire community regardless of personal costs.” The article then discusses an approach for thinking about a situation where there are “two conflicting sets of ‘right’ values,” and suggests some questions that may help in determining the ethical course of action: (a) Which ethical values are in conflict (for example, trustworthiness, compassion, loyalty, responsibility, fairness, or respect)?; (b) What are the facts? What are the benefits to be achieved or the harm to be avoided by a particular decision? Is there a decision that does more good than harm?; (c) What are your options? Is there a course of action that would be consistent with both sets of values?; (d) Is one course of action more consistent with a value that is particularly important to you (for example, promise-keeping or trustworthiness)?; (e) What decision best reflects your responsibility as an officeholder to serve the interests of the community as a whole?; (f) What decision will best promote public confidence in the agency and your leadership?

Let’s look at another of Sherman’s Eight Steps: Taking responsibility—acknowledging our complete, sole responsibility for every one of our actions... Another example given in the Handbook is the situation when, as a local elected official, you are asked to make exceptions of your jurisdiction’s planning laws. Such as when a developer asks for a general plan amendment to enable a project to be approved and points to numerous benefits that will flow to the community as the result of the amendment. The article suggests that the first step is to consider what ethical values are at stake—for example fairness to those property owners who developed their properties in accordance with the general plan. The next step is to weigh the competing costs and benefits—what are the benefits of adhering to the general plan? Will an amendment open the door for other amendment requests? How can the agency maintain the overall integrity of the general plan? Are there options that might enable the community to reap some of the benefits while still maintaining the overall integrity of the general plan? Finally, consider which approach will best promote the public’s confidence in the planning process? Will the public’s confidence be undermined if the agency doesn’t enforce the plan? Or will the result look so rigid and unfair to the developer that it will undermine the public’s faith in the agency as a decision making body? What decision will best reflect on the agency’s stewardship over the community’s growth and development?

When corporations do not meet the expectation of the public, society imposes greater social control—regulatory, judicial and legislative. When governments do not meet the expectations of the public, society imposes reform through judicial and legislative avenues.

As public servants, on whatever level, our task goes beyond accomplishing a smooth running, efficient, effective organization. It includes nourishing integrity.

⁹ *Establishing A Public Service Ethic*, Public Confidence Project, Institute for Local Self Government, www.ilsg.org.