



BY DAVID COHEN
For Workplace News

I have a lot of trouble with integrity. That's not a personal confession and it's not a statement about today's (occasionally challenging) business climate. Instead, it's a problem I've had for many years with the word itself.

My difficulties emerge, for example, when I'm doing a values exercise with a senior team. As we discuss what makes their organization unique, someone inevitably suggests that "integrity" must be included on the final list. That's when my brow furrows and my headache starts.

According to a recent Harvard Business Review article, 55 percent of Fortune 100 companies define integrity as one of their "core" values. When working with a senior team, I could just cite that statistic if I wanted to discourage the inclusion of integrity on their list. Or, I could add that integrity was one of Enron's values too.

But either because I'm too polite to take a cheap shot or an optimist at heart, I take a deep breath and say: "Okay. If integrity is one of your values, let's define it in a way that is meaningful within your organization. What are the actions or behaviours that define integrity?" Then the fun begins.

Integrity is not a value

I always find it difficult to mediate the ensuing debate. Other values, equally overrepresented on corporate mission statements, do not create the same trouble. For example, senior leaders also love the words teamwork, respect, transparency, quality, and stewardship.

No problem. What kind of teamwork? Teamwork between frontline staff and management to provide great customer service.

What kind of respect? To one organization it means respect for the traditions of the brand (compliance), to another, respect for the environment. How about stewardship? Sometimes it means financial oversight, other times it means stewardship over the community's resources. Defining those values in specific contexts and clear behaviours gives them power.

But when you get to integrity, it is much harder to agree. Are we talking about commitment to quality? Honesty in dealings? Trust between employees?

Recently, one of my clients, an insurance provider, went through its values exercise. At the same time, it was being sued by a family for disputed coverage. We went through our values work as the newspapers blared headlines about the progress of the court case. Perhaps because of that contentious atmosphere, our debate was particularly rigorous and thoughtful.

When we finally came to a consensus, everyone in the room was happy. Then one executive threw cold water in our faces: "If all of these values are really true, and I think they are, then we're doing the wrong thing fighting this family in court."

It was a sobering thought, but one that galvanized a powerful reaction. Immediately, it was decided that the company would reverse its stand and pay up. It was the only thing to do if they were to be honest to their belief system (values). The lawyers for the family couldn't believe it. But the executive team had a good night's sleep, comforted by the certainty that they had done right by the family and the organization.

The reaction to this switch was overwhelmingly positive outside the company. It was, in fact, an event which had the makings of a genuine corporate legend — one of those stories which demonstrates what an organization really stands for, better than any list of values.

The press loved the decision.

Politicians applauded it. The community genuinely appreciated it as a refreshing gesture. Other companies admired it. They understood that it takes a lot of courage to do the right thing when that costs money.

More importantly, the people within the organization felt good about the decision. The employees

held their heads a little higher and could explain it within the rationale of the values. As one executive declared: "We acted with integrity."

I came to realize integrity is not a value — it's the culmination of living your values. To violate a value is to diminish your integrity.

Think about the powerful emotions aroused when a company gets caught in a hypocritical stance. For example, when a senior team turns out to be crooked, or a finance firm permits harassment of women to take place systemically, or a manufacturer pollutes the environment, the public (and internal) reactions can be severe. But the reactions will be much more severe if that company espouses financial stewardship, teamwork, or respect for the environment as differentiating values.

To include integrity in a list of values is redundant. Integrity is not a value unto itself but a summing up of the other values.

Organizations act with integrity when they live up to their values, especially in painfully tough times or situations. Doing so can be difficult when it costs money, competitive position, or strategy. But even though the benefits of acting with integrity may not always be as clear as with the insurance company I described, the reinforcement of integrity, internally and externally, has its own well-deserved rewards. •

David S. Cohen is president of Strategic Action Group Ltd. and author of *The Talent Edge: A Behavioral Approach to Hiring, Developing, and Keeping Top Performers*. His e-mail is david@sagltd.com.