

# Integrity Is Foundational to Leadership

McKinlee Covey

In May of 2005, Andy Roddick, one of the top tennis players in the world at the time, was a favorite to win the Italian Masters tournament. Early on, Roddick's skill was on full display: He beat his opponent Fernando Verdasco in the first set. He was winning the next set too; on the match point, the referee called Verdasco's second serve as out and declared Roddick the winner. The crowd cheered.

However, Roddick looked closely at the mark on the court where the serve had been called out and did not believe the call was correct. Under no formal obligation to tell the truth, Roddick informed the referee of the perceived error and asked for the point to be replayed. He returned to his side of the net, ready to play on, only wanting to win if the victory was fair and square. Verdasco won the replayed point, and then the match. A breath away from victory, Roddick lost in an upset, going from being a tournament favorite to an early elimination.

Although Roddick lost his shot at the big prize that day, he gained something arguably more valuable—he cemented his reputation as a man of integrity. In a single moment, he demonstrated the strength of his character for posterity and inspired fans with his commitment to honesty. Future opponents and referees alike could rest assured: here was a trustworthy sportsman.

Even if we've never participated in a high stakes sporting event on the world stage, many of us can relate to this story. We've all faced moments of choice when we are called to do the right thing even if it carries consequences. Each of these moments is an opportunity for us to show who we truly are—both as a leader and as a person.

In life and leadership, it takes courage to do the right thing and discipline to do so consistently. When we act with both courage and discipline, we develop our integrity and become leaders worth following.

## Integrity Is Foundational to Leadership

Doug Conant wrote that integrity is “foundational and mandatory to leadership.” Too often, we get lost in the weeds when thinking about leadership, creating long lists of what a good leader needs to do. Or we conflate good leadership with being charming and bold. But at the end of the day, leadership begins and ends with a simple premise: Are you a person of your word?

Research shows that most employees rank trust in their bosses as the most essential component for workplace satisfaction. When people feel that they can trust their leaders they perform better, are more innovative and engaged, and experience less stress and burnout. Meanwhile, low-trust organizations experience the opposite effects. So how can leaders embody integrity and build trust? Integrity is all about aligning your personal thoughts and actions with your public persona. Who you are in private and who you are in public must connect.

Dr. Stephen R. Covey said, “Moral authority comes from following universal and timeless principles like honesty, integrity, and treating people with respect.” We cannot fake, coerce, or pay our way to moral authority—it must be earned through our daily interactions and behaviors. Employees and colleagues alike are attuned to your leadership actions; they want to know that what you say matches up with what you do and who you are.

When we make integrity part of our leadership foundation, all our other qualities are on solid ground. And with trust as our bedrock, our organizations can thrive. Here are four practices that will help you move towards integrity in your leadership behaviors.

## **1. Start with Yourself – Make It a Habit**

Are some people more predisposed to acting with integrity? Perhaps. But it doesn't matter. Whether or not you were born with a strong moral compass or were raised a certain way, anyone can lead a life of integrity. Integrity is a choice. But it isn't a spur of the moment decision; like any competency, it is honed over time.

It's doubtful that Roddick's choice to be truthful at the Italian Masters was an outlier or whim; it's more likely it was part of a decision pattern. At some point he decided to play honestly no matter what, and then he matched his behavior to that decision in moments small and large. Each of us can do the same. You can say today that you want to live with integrity and then commit to the principle, practicing in more and more moments over time. When you practice making the right decisions consistently, eventually it becomes a habit. Dr. Covey researched and wrote about this extensively, explaining that integrity starts with keeping commitments to ourselves. He wrote: “As we make and keep commitments, even small commitments, we begin to establish an inner integrity that gives us the awareness of self-control, and the courage and strength to accept more of the responsibility for our own lives. By making and keeping promises to ourselves and others, little by little, our honor becomes greater than our moods.”

This process starts small, but it yields large and long-lasting results. First, integrity becomes a habit and then an essential part of who you are. The more you do it, the more natural it becomes, creating a virtuous cycle of momentum that strengthens your resolve to keep doing what is right, especially in difficult situations.

As novelist Mary Ann Evans writing under the pen name George Eliot once said, “Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds.”

## 2. Declare Your Intent

It’s important to remember that the people you work with are not mind readers. If you want people to know what you stand for, what you believe in, and what guides your decisions, you have to tell them. Otherwise, how will they know what to measure your actions against? Lack of clarity often leads to miscommunication, unmet expectations, frustration, poor results, and lagging collaboration. So, one of the first steps to leading with integrity is a practice Doug Conant calls, “Declaring Yourself.” He describes it this way: “The first hour of the first day I work with someone, I declare myself. I set aside an hour for a one-on-one meeting aimed at removing the mystery from our working relationship. Rather than unproductively spending the first few months working together trying to indirectly figure out what to expect from one another — I have found it to be much more productive to take the issue head on. Then, we can constructively focus on the challenges at hand as quickly as possible.”

At the end of the hour he says, “I just spent an hour sharing with you the way I intend to behave and some of the motivation for that behavior. If I do what I say I will do, I guess that means you can trust me. If I don’t, I guess that means you can’t.”

Declaring yourself lays the groundwork to earn people’s trust by first extending trust. You’re inviting people to get to know you, but also to hold you accountable to what you say. This is an exercise in vulnerability, and may feel uncomfortable, but it is highly effective. We must first communicate our intent in order to demonstrate integrity and build trust.

## 3. Do What You Say

The saying goes that “talk is cheap.” And it’s often true, but it doesn’t have to be. After you’ve declared yourself, it’s time to back up your word with your actions. When you do what you say, your talk is no longer cheapened—it becomes a treasure.

Doug Conant wrote that leading with integrity means, “*always* consciously acting with the knowledge that others are relying on us to embody our shared values with our words and deeds.” He says that words and actions are equally important; they go hand in hand. Talk without action breeds mistrust.

To grow your credibility and to create what Doug calls, “a profound reservoir of trust and belief in your ability,” you must walk your talk. How? Here are a few best practices:

- Prioritize your time according to your values.
- Own your mistakes & share your successes.

- Ask for and implement feedback.
- See each interaction as an opportunity to match your actions to your words.

#### **4. Be Consistent – in Public and in Private**

Oprah Winfrey said, “Real integrity is doing the right thing, knowing that nobody’s going to know whether you did it or not.” Her words hold an important lesson for leaders: One of the truest tests of our integrity is our consistency—with or without an audience.

To fulfill the commitment to yourself that helps build your integrity habit, it’s crucial to uphold your values and ideals even when people aren’t watching. Dr. Covey called this, “being loyal to the absent,” and it’s a way to show respect to everyone in your organization, as well as to yourself.

Start to think with more intention about each moment of choice in your day—even the ones that people don’t see. Small moments matter. When can you step closer to your declared values? Maybe it means prioritizing purpose over profit, apologizing for a misstep, stifling your instinct to jump in before you’ve listened, or taking time to thank an employee for their contributions.

There are infinite opportunities to practice your integrity habit in any given day. The more consistent and loyal you are to your principles, the more consistency and loyalty you earn from your constituents.

### **Integrity Inspires**

As we lead with integrity, we earn moral authority, increase trust within our organizations—and most of all, we inspire others. Inspiration is powerful. Research shows that employees are inspired by leaders who commit to their values and that, “the ability to inspire creates the highest levels of employee engagement and commitment.”

As you model integrity, declare your intent, do what you say, and practice consistency, you will inspire others to greatness.