

# The Leadership-Integrity Link

Gen Ronald R. Fogleman

*The supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity.*

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

As I met with the Air Force community in the first months of my tenure as chief of staff, I was struck by how many times issues related to leadership and integrity popped up. Without a doubt, the Air Force, from the flight line to the Pentagon, is led by some of the most capable, committed, and caring individuals that I have ever seen. Of the many challenges they face each day, the challenge I consider the most critical to mission success is setting the standard for integrity within their organizations.

Few will dispute that we have experienced significant change over the past several years. We won the Cold War; we've downsized and reorganized the Air Force; and we are engaged in an unprecedented number of operations worldwide. Our society has also changed and not always for the better. But one thing will never change: men and women of the Air Force must have impeccable integrity. This is especially true of Air Force leaders to whom the men and women of the Air Force look for guidance. Integrity and leadership are inextricably linked. Without integrity, leadership theories are just that—theories. Integrity is the cement that binds organizations together, the cornerstone of mission accomplishment.

## Tracing the Leadership-Integrity Link

A friend of mine named Bill Cohen once wrote, "Leadership is the art of influencing others to their maximum performance to accomplish any task, objective, or project."<sup>1</sup> This compelling definition applies to leaders of all types of organizations, including Air Force units. While Bill described leadership as an art, my own experience has shown me it is an art that can be learned. I have also found that the main difference between units that perform at their maximum potential and those that fail is usually their leadership. Of course, it is rare that you find a unit that has all good or all bad leaders and followers. Just like organizations in other professions, there is usually a mix of talent. But the point I want to stress is that a *single individual* in a position of leadership can make the difference between a unit's success or failure.

Gen Ronald R. Fogleman is chief of staff, United States Air Force.

Leadership is about motivating people to perform and accomplish the unit's mission. Working towards this common goal builds unit cohesion, trust, and a sense of self-esteem. A good leader fosters these qualities. But a failure of integrity poisons the outfit, destroys trust between people, and breaks down unit cohesion. While leadership qualities are diverse, integrity is simply a yes-or-no question. You either have it or you don't. For that reason, leaders must always display the highest standards of integrity.

## Characteristics of Integrity

In my experience, I have found that leaders with integrity are sincere and consistent, have substance and character, and are good finishers.

### Sincerity

Sincerity is behavior that is unfeigned and presents no false appearance. Leaders with integrity are sincere—their actions match their words. There is an anecdote about Gen Wilbur Creech that illustrates this point. When he was commander of the Tactical Air Command in the early 1980s, General Creech made it a habit to get out and meet his people where they worked and lived. On one trip, General Creech was inspecting a supply warehouse when he noticed a sergeant sitting in a chair patched with electrical tape and propped up by a brick.

When asked why he didn't get a better chair, the sergeant explained there were no new ones available for supply sergeants. General Creech said he would take care of the problem. Following the inspection, General Creech instructed his aide to fly back to Langley [Air Force Base, Virginia] with the old chair and give it to the general in charge of logistics. General Creech told the general that the broken chair was his until he resolved his supply problem, and he sent the general's chair to the supply sergeant.<sup>2</sup> General Creech made a habit of matching his words and actions. That's what made him a person of integrity and a great leader. The more a leader's behavior matches his or her words, the more loyal people will become, both to the leader *and* the organization.

### Consistency

A single example of integrity makes an impression, but a leader's behavior must be consistent if he or she is to suc-

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cessfully shape an organization. In fact, integrity is an imperative since a single breach of integrity can leave a permanent scar. Leaders must also be consistent in their enforcement of disciplinary standards. A commander who uses discriminators such as rank or friendship to determine a response to a breach of discipline has a serious integrity problem. Nothing destroys morale quite as effectively as “throwing the book” at a junior officer for a serious infraction while allowing a senior officer to retire in lieu of punishment for similar behavior. Leaders must practice what they preach and apply standards even-handedly. It is essential for discipline, for morale, and for mission accomplishment.

### Substance

To be a leader, you must have more than the *image* of integrity—you must also have substance. President Abraham Lincoln once told a story about a farmer who had a tall, majestic-looking tree growing next to his house. One morning he saw a squirrel run up the side of the tree and disappear into a hole. Curious, the farmer looked into the hole and discovered that the tree he had always admired for its apparent grandeur was hollow inside and in danger of falling on his home during a strong storm.<sup>3</sup> Like that tree, leaders who have the appearance of substance but lack internal integrity won't have the strength to make it through the tough times. In the military, commanders with a veneer of integrity cannot build organizations capable of withstanding the unique challenges of military life, much less the trials of combat.

### Being a Good Finisher

Finally, leaders show their integrity by performing all tasks to the maximum extent of their ability, despite the relative importance of the task or who gets the credit. Air Force Space Command chaplain Ben Perez uses the analogy of a team that continues to play their hearts out in a game they are obviously losing to illustrate the determination professionals with integrity will consistently display. Perhaps no organization exhibited greater devotion to duty than the 17th Pursuit Squadron in the Philippines at the start of World War II. Despite heavy Japanese air attacks, pilots took off daily on solo armed reconnaissance missions and occasionally even attacked enemy shipping. Although their missions were nearly suicidal, the men of the 17th flew combat sorties until Bataan fell in May 1942. The 17th Pursuit Squadron was a team led by men with the integrity to stay the course long past the hoopla and glory. That's the kind of devotion to duty, the kind of integrity that all Air Force leaders should strive to build.

## Building Integrity

I believe you build a lifestyle of integrity one step at a time. Individual acts of integrity lead to a habit of integrity, and individual habits add up to a way of life. Simplistic? Perhaps so, but I've never found a more effective way of developing personal integrity than by applying it to everything you do, every day of your life—no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential the matter at hand. And since organizations tend to take on the personality of their leadership, building integrity must start at the top. Dishonest acts are like cancers that eat at the moral fiber of organizations, especially if the acts are explicitly or implicitly condoned by leaders.

Breaches of integrity can occur for a number of reasons, such as the fear of failure, embarrassment, arrogance, or just plain laziness. Good leaders admit mistakes and take responsibility for their actions. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of this is Gen Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg. When it became clear after Pickett's charge that his army had suffered a disastrous defeat, Lee openly told his men, “All this has been my fault. It is I who have lost the fight. . . .”<sup>4</sup> On hearing this, Lee's men shouted it was they who had failed Lee and pleaded that he allow them to attack the enemy again. When leaders show that they have the character and integrity to admit they are wrong, amazing things tend to happen—people will trust them and will follow them anywhere.

## The Challenge

Of the many challenges Air Force leaders face today, building integrity is the most important. Admittedly, this is not an easy task, especially in today's permissive society. But we are committed to building a quality Air Force, and this requires quality leadership. *Without integrity, leadership cannot flourish and our mission will suffer.* The Air Force standard is to exhibit integrity in everything we do. It should permeate our lifestyle. Anything less is unacceptable to the people you lead, the Air Force, and the American people.

### Notes

1. William A. Cohen, *The Art of the Leader* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 3.
2. Tom Peters and Nancy Austin, *A Passion for Excellence* (New York: Random House, 1985), 48.
3. Donald T. Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 55–56.
4. Burke Davis, *Gray Fox: Robert E. Lee and the Civil War* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1988), 245–46.