The Irony of Integrity
A Study of the Character Strengths of Leaders

By: William A. Gentry, Kristin L. Cullen, and David G. Altman

Center for
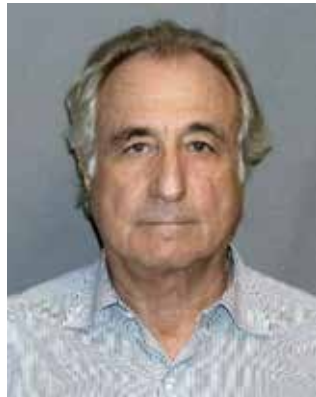Creative
Leadership®

Martha Stewart

Mark Hurd

The true test of a man's character is what he does when no one is watching.

—Attributed to many including John Wooden and H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

Ken Lay

Bernie Madoff

John Edwards

Contents

Introduction

The ethical scandals of business, political, education, and sports leaders often hold a prominent place in newspaper headlines, twitter feeds, blogs, radio broadcasts, television news programs, and talk shows. Think about the ethical failures of leadership over the past couple of decades:

Ken Lay and Jeffrey Skilling of Enron—Securities and accounting fraud, conspiracy

Bernie Ebbers of WorldCom—Accounting fraud, taking personal loans from company

Dennis Kozlowski and Mark Swartz of Tyco—Misappropriating corporate funds, tax fraud, tax evasion

John and Timothy Rigas of Adelphia Communications—Fraud and conspiracy, misrepresenting financial results

Dean Buntrock of Waste Management—Fraud, falsifying documents, misrepresenting financial results

Gary Winnick of Global Crossing—Fraud, accounting irregularities

Sanjay Kumar of Computer Associates—Securities fraud, false accounting practices

Chung Mong Koo of Hyundai Motor—Fraud, embezzlement, allegedly put money away in a fund to bribe officials

Martha Stewart of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia and James McDermott of Keefe, Bruyette, & Woods—Insider trading

Sam Waksal of ImClone—Insider trading, securities violations, conspiracy, wire fraud

Mark Hurd of Hewlett-Packard—Inaccurate expense reports and alleged inappropriate relationship with a female contractor

Brian Dunn of Best Buy and Gary Friedman of Restoration Hardware—Personal misconduct and inappropriate behavior with a female employee

Senator John Edwards—Campaign finance law violation

John Browne of BP—Lying under oath

David Edmondson of Radio Shack—Falsified résumé

Executives at Lehman Brothers—Sub-prime mortgage lending practices

Bernie Madoff and Allen Stanford—Ponzi schemes

Olympus Corporation—Tobashi schemes

Lance Armstrong and many elite cyclists—Claimed never to have used performance enhancing drugs with evidence illustrating the contrary

Jerry Sandusky and other individuals—Embroiled in scandal at Pennsylvania State University

No doubt, this already long list of ethical failings is far from an exhaustive one. Consequently, these highly publicized ethical scandals have challenged people's overall faith in the integrity and character of leaders and public figures. Academicians and the popular press both have tried to uncover reasons behind these and other scandals by highlighting the role of character flaws in organizational or personal failures. Our research takes an alternative approach. We examine the importance of character strengths in the performance of leaders in organizations. Specifically, we look at whether the character strengths of integrity, bravery, perspective, and social intelligence matter for the job performance of C-level executives and middle-level managers.

The population of C-suite executives is obviously important to study as they are the figureheads of organizations, they set direction for their organizations, and they model normative behavior. Moment by moment, employees carefully monitor the words and nonverbal behaviors of C-suite executives. Social learning theory looms large as workers observe and imitate the actions of these leaders. Executives' thoughts about leadership cascade down the ranks and influence the organization's overall ethical climate and the way people act and lead throughout an organization. A leader's character shapes the culture of his or her organization and also of public opinion about an organization. Middle-level managers are also an important managerial group to study because they hold important leadership positions in their own right and they are in the pipeline for future positions in the upper echelons of organizations.

"We are at the end of a difficult generation of business leadership and maybe leadership in general. Tough-mindedness, a good trait, was replaced by meanness and greed, both terrible traits."

—Jeff Immelt, GE Chairman and CEO

Four Character Strengths Leaders Need

We focus on the character strengths of integrity, bravery, perspective, and social intelligence because they are important in the selection and development of managers, particularly at the top-levels of organizations (Sosik & Cameron, 2010). These character strengths are part of Peterson and Seligman's (2004) Values in Action (VIA) model of character strengths and virtues and are defined as positive personal qualities that indicate virtue and human excellence. In what follows, we describe what these character strengths are and give reasons why top-level executives and middle-level managers need these character strengths.

1. Integrity

Walk the talk. That is what integrity really is all about. At the heart of integrity is being consistent, honest, moral, and trustworthy. Leaders with integrity are consistent in the face of adversity, show consistency in their words and actions, and are unfailing with who they are and what they stand for (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). Leaders with integrity act with authenticity and honesty by speaking the truth, presenting themselves in a genuine way with sincerity, showing no pretense, and taking responsibility for their own feelings and actions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Integrity is an important factor in the performance of top-level executives and middle-level managers. Those at the top of organizations are figureheads who should model the organization's values (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This is important to an organization because C-level executives interact regularly with external stakeholders, develop networks inside and outside their organization, and try to build consensus among multiple stakeholders (Sosik, Juzbasich, & Chun, 2011). Integrity is also important for middle-level managers who must relate well with people in order to build and maintain strong social networks and relationships with others across the organization as well as above and below them in the organizational hierarchy (Huy, 2001). Integrity makes it easier for others to trust a manager, which is likely important as middle-level managers fulfill their duties in networking, consensus-building, and relationship management.

2. Bravery

As the saying goes, it is lonely at the top. Bravery is needed to stand out on your own. Bravery is defined as acting with valor by not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, nor pain; speaking up for what is right even when opposition exists; and acting upon conviction despite facing an unpopular environment (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Brave executives are more likely to take the lead on unpopular but necessary actions because of their moral courage (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). This is an important character strength that C-level executives need to do their job effectively. Leaders who are viewed as brave are evaluated as capable of producing long-term sustained success (Kilmann, O'Hara, & Strauss, 2010). Middle-level managers need bravery as well. They are "stuck in the middle" of the organizational hierarchy and frequently face conflict (Huy, 2002; Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk, & Roe, 2011). They need to be brave in the face of linking the vision of upper management to the oftentimes conflicting realities of those below them and their peers around them (Thompson, Purdy, & Summers, 2008).

3. Perspective

When you are at the top of an organization it is important that you pay attention and focus on the horizon of business opportunities and challenges. Top-level executives need the broadest of business perspectives to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their competitors (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) and to make decisions that position the organization for long-term success. They also must understand the trends occurring in their industry and other industries that affect them (Geletkanycz & Hambrick, 1997). Perspective allows leaders to incorporate competitor and customer views into a single organizational vision (Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannella, 2009). Middle-level managers also need perspective to engage effectively in change and strategy formation. Perspective also facilitates systems thinking, which is part of their role—middle-level managers must scan the environment around them in order to generate ideas and plan for the future (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Huy, 2001, 2002; Raes et al., 2011).

4. Social Intelligence

Social intelligence is needed at the top and middle of the organizational hierarchy. Social intelligence is the awareness of your and others' motives and feelings (you have a sense of what makes you and others tick) and having the agility to adapt your behavior to what the situation dictates (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The behavior of top-level executives impacts their image as a public figure of their organization (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Top-level executives must use their social intelligence to build alliances, manage conflict, conduct successful negotiations (Sosik, 2006), and demonstrate behavioral flexibility and differentiation across roles that are unique to their place in the organization (Hooijberg & Schneider, 2001). The importance of social intelligence is not lost on middle-level managers either. Middle-level managers must utilize social intelligence, as an important component of their job is working with other people, including stakeholders and constituents (Zaccaro, Gilbert, Thor, & Mumford, 1991). Middle-level managers are a conduit between those above them and below them in the organizational hierarchy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Huy, 2002; Raes et al., 2011). Thus, it is not surprising that social intelligence is believed to be a key differentiator between successful and unsuccessful leaders (Zaccaro et al., 1991).

The Findings

Integrity Is Important for Some, But Not Others

Our research sought to better understand the character strengths of leaders by examining the relationship between four character strengths (integrity, bravery, perspective, and social intelligence) and performance. Specifically, we examined which of these character strengths was most important for the performance of top-level executives and middle-level managers. (See the research information section at the end of this report for more information on the research.)

We found a positive relationship between direct report ratings of each character strength, and boss/board member ratings of performance. When examined separately, the more integrity, bravery, perspective, and social intelligence leaders have, the higher their performance ratings. No real surprise with these findings. But, that is not the whole story.

We then examined the character strengths together to determine their relative importance for performance. We also compared the findings from our middle-level manager sample to the findings from our top-level executive sample. What we found was surprising and perhaps a little disconcerting. The importance of these character strengths differs for middle-level managers as compared to top executives. Social intelligence was the most important character strength in relation to performance ratings for middle-level managers. For the C-level executives, integrity, bravery, and social intelligence were all important in relation to performance while perspective was not. Integrity, however, was the most important contributor to top-level executives' current performance followed closely by bravery.

What Our Findings Mean

Our results profile the importance of these character strengths toward the performance of middle-level managers and top-level executives. What we found was a complicated story in that these character strengths are not universally important to leaders' effectiveness. Social intelligence was the most important character strength for middle-level managers' performance, while integrity was the most important for top-level executives' performance. Further, when comparing the findings across the two samples, both integrity and bravery were significantly more important predictors of performance for top-level executives than for middle-level managers.

Given that social intelligence was the most important of the four character strengths for middle-level managers' performance, we encourage middle-level managers to go through initiatives aimed at improving their social intelligence. Middle-level managers can become "stuck in the middle" of the organizational hierarchy. They are tasked with communicating the vision of those at the top to others at lower levels in an organization. Simultaneously, they have to engage with lower-level employees in the day-to-day, ground-level work of organizations and communicate the thoughts, information, and feedback of those employees to top-level executives (Huy, 2002; Raes et al., 2011). To develop greater social intelligence, managers should obtain developmental experiences or leadership development training so they can learn to enhance workplace relationships, given their special place in organizations.

A quick test of integrity is to ask yourself if the behavior you are about to engage in would be approved by your mother, grandmother, or primary school teacher.

Top-level executives should also pay attention to several character strengths, particularly integrity and bravery as those were most important for their performance. The two may go hand-in-hand. Integrity is needed when deciding what action should be taken. Bravery is needed to take actions that might be unpopular. Taking the time to go through deliberate interventions such as executive coaching and leadership development training are helpful even for the senior-most executives. Executives can enhance their integrity in many ways. Being transparent is one way to act with integrity. A quick test of integrity is to ask yourself if the behavior you are about to engage in would be approved by your mother, grandmother, or primary school teacher. Leaders should embrace absolute honesty and consider engaging in mindfulness practices such as prayer, meditation, or reflection. Practices that can enhance a leader's bravery include regularly setting aside time to imagine what would happen if a crisis occurred at work and working out a plan in advance, or modeling the behavior or value system of courageous people.

"You will be confronted with questions every day that test your morals . . . Think carefully and, for your sake, do the right thing, not the easy thing."

—Former Tyco International CEO Dennis Kozlowski, from his commencement speech at Saint Anselm College. He was indicted for tax evasion 17 days later.

The Irony (and Trouble) of Our Findings

Based on our findings, integrity is the most important character strength for the performance of top-level executives, but has less to do with the performance of middle-level managers. The irony of this statement may provide insight into why there are ethical failures at the top of organizations.

Job performance is a well-used proxy for promotability (Conger & Fulmer, 2003). Managers who perform the best in their current roles are usually the ones promoted to higher levels of management. Based on our results, middle-level managers may in fact be promoted to top-level positions with little explicit regard to their integrity as it is not as important as other factors in evaluations of their current performance. In turn, when middle managers are promoted to the C-suite, they may or may not have the integrity to perform effectively at higher levels. Because integrity hasn't mattered to their performance up to that point, it may not be considered in the promotion decisions of middle-level managers. Organizations may be promoting people up their ranks without knowledge of a crucial character strength needed in those top-level positions. When middle-level managers get to the top of organizations, they may neither have, nor have developed, the integrity needed at the highest of leadership levels.

> "[I] lived my life in a certain way to make sure that I would never violate any law— certainly never any criminal laws—and always maintained that most important to me was my integrity, was my character, were my values . . ."
>
> —Former Enron CEO Kenneth Lay, in his first primetime interview after pleading not guilty to criminal counts with CNN's *Larry King Live*.

I Have Integrity . . .
Wait, You Don't Think So?

What's more troubling, C-suite executives may not know they have problems with integrity when they get their C-suite office. The top-level executives in our study overrated their integrity in comparison to ratings of their integrity provided by their direct reports. The same pattern was not found for middle-level managers. The ratings of integrity by middle-level managers were much closer to (in agreement with) the ratings provided by their direct reports.

What does this mean? Integrity is a potential blind spot of serious concern. Upon reaching top-level positions, C-level executives may become overconfident and overrate themselves on their integrity compared to ratings by their direct reports. Unfortunately, they may be out-of-touch with how they are perceived (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001) because of the continual success they achieved during their career to these top-level positions. No doubt, success breeds confidence. But, there is a fine line between confidence and arrogance, which may make a leader unapproachable. It may be very difficult to receive adequate, timely, or completely truthful feedback from direct reports if subordinates feel reluctant to give feedback, have fear of giving feedback, or are intimidated to only give good feedback (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Dotlich & Cairo, 2003; Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1991; Yammarino & Atwater, 2001). Without this feedback, however, leaders won't be aware of failures in ethics or low levels of integrity until it is too late (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Kaiser & Hogan, 2010; Sosik, 2006).

Conclusion

Character strengths are an important contributor to leader effectiveness. We found that when you consider leader level, some character strengths are more important than others. As leaders move up the organizational ladder, they may become unaware of the repercussions of the outward display of their character. This is one reason why self-awareness is so important to effective leadership. Leadership development initiatives are important for all leaders in an organization. And whatever leadership development initiative is chosen, there should be a focus on increasing or enhancing self-awareness around competencies related to character strengths. Middle-level managers should focus on social intelligence as well as integrity, particularly if they have aspirations for succeeding in top-level positions where integrity is of the utmost importance. Those at the very top of organizations should try to get as much honest feedback about their integrity as they can. If not addressed in time, this blind spot could lead to failure, infamy, or worse for more than just the primary individuals involved, as evidenced by the devastating and far-reaching consequences of the many recent well-publicized organizational and public scandals such as those cited at the beginning of this paper.

> ". . . Bernard Madoff is a longstanding leader in the financial services industry. We will fight to get through this unfortunate set of events. He's a person of integrity."
>
> —Daniel Horowitz, a defense lawyer for Bernie Madoff

The Research

This white paper is based on findings from the following two studies:

Gentry, W. A., Cullen, K. L., Sosik, J. J., Chun, J. U., Leupold, C. R., & Tonidandel, S. (2013). Integrity's place among the character strengths of middle-level managers and top-level executives. *The Leadership Quarterly, 24*(3), 395–404.

Sosik, J. J., Gentry, W. A., & Chun, J. U. (2012). The value of virtue in the upper echelons: A multisource examination of executive character strengths and performance. *The Leadership Quarterly, 23*, 367–382.

Our Samples and Measures

In our examination of leaders' character strengths, we chose four character strengths that are part of CCL's 360-degree assessment, Executive Dimensions (ED). ED is specifically designed to measure executive competencies. ED's norm group includes the senior-most executives across a number of business sectors. Of the 16 competencies measured in ED, four tapped character strengths (see Sosik, Gentry, & Chun, 2012). We used the ED measure of "credibility" to assess the character strength of integrity, "courage" to assess bravery, "business perspective" to assess perspective, and "interpersonal savvy" to assess social intelligence.

Our sample consisted of leaders who took ED between November 2007 and October 2011. In total, data from 246 middle-level managers (i.e., departmant executive, plant manager, senior staff, office manager, mid-level administrator) and 191 top-level executives (i.e., CEO, CFO, COO, CIO, or president) were used in our study. Table 1 gives demographic information for each managerial population in our study.

We used direct report ratings of each leader's character (from ED). We also attained boss or board member ratings of the leader's performance using the following five items: (1) How would you rate this person's performance in his or her present job; (2) Where would you place this person as a leader relative to other leaders inside and outside your organization; (3) What is the likelihood that this person will derail (i.e., plateau, be demoted, or fired) in the next five years as a result of his or her actions or behaviors as a manager; (4) To what extent does this individual contribute to the overall effectiveness of this organization; and (5) Rate this person's overall level of effectiveness. We created an overall score of leader performance based on these items.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Middle-Level Managers (n = 246) and Top-Level Executives (n = 191).

Demographic Variable	Middle-Level Manager	Top-Level Executive
Gender	67.1% male	80.1% male
Race	87.8% Caucasian	86.9% Caucasian
Age	M = 45.64 years (SD = 6.69)	M = 48.77 years (SD = 6.86)
Education	94.3% had at least a bachelor's	91.1% had at least a bachelor's
Citizenship	100% US citizens	100% US citizens
Tenure in Organization	M = 14.34 years (SD = 8.91)	M = 11.33 years (SD = 9.68)
Sector	58.5% private sector	61.3% private sector
Sample Job Titles	Department executive, plant manager, senior staff, office manager, mid-level administrator	CEO, CFO, COO, CIO, or president

Analysis and Results

We first looked at the relationship between each character strength and performance separately and found that each character strength was related to the performance of both top-level executives and middle-level managers. We also did a comparison of the importance of each of the four character strengths when examined together using a special analysis called relative weight analysis or RWA (Johnson, 2000; Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2011). Using RWA allows us to understand exactly how important statistically each character strength is in relation to the other character strengths. We conducted this analysis separately for the middle-level manager and top-level executive samples, and from the results, determined the relative importance of each character strength to performance when compared to all other character strengths. We then compared the findings from our middle-level manager sample to the findings from our top-level executive sample. The results, found in Table 2, display our surprising and perhaps troubling findings: The importance of these character strengths differs for middle-level managers as compared to top-level executives. When the character strengths are examined together, the largest and only statistically significant character strength in relation to performance ratings for middle-level managers was social intelligence. The findings were different for top-level executives. For the C-level executives, when examined together, integrity, bravery, and social intelligence were all statistically significant and important while perspective was not. Integrity, however, was the most important contributor to top-level executives' current performance followed closely by bravery.

In the final part of our analysis, we examined the self-awareness of participants with regard to their integrity. Along with their direct report ratings, we measured how well the participants of our study believed that they displayed integrity from their own self-ratings on ED. On average, top-level executives in our study rated their integrity significantly higher than their integrity was rated by their direct reports. The same discrepancy was not found for middle-level managers. The ratings of integrity by middle-level managers were much closer to (in agreement with) the ratings provided by their direct reports. This pattern is displayed in Figure 1.

The behavior of top-level executives impacts their image as a public figure of their organization.

Table 2

Relative Weight Analysis Results for Relative Importance of Predictors

Variables	Middle-Level Manager		Top-Level Executive	
	Raw Relative Weight	Rescaled Relative Weight	Raw Relative Weight	Rescaled Relative Weight
Perspective	0.007	9.822	0.012	5.711
Integrity	0.009[†]	13.720	0.069*[†]	33.755
Bravery	0.017[†]	25.364	0.068*[†]	33.164
Social Intelligence	0.035*	51.094	0.056*	23.370

Note:* indicated relative weight significantly different from zero at $p < .05$ level. [†] indicates relative weight significantly different across levels at $p < .05$ level.

Important findings:

Social Intelligence is the only character strength of the four that was a significant predictor of performance for middle-level managers; it accounts for over half (51.094%) of the total variance explained by all four character strengths.

Integrity, bravery, and social intelligence were all character strengths that were significant predictors of performance for top-level executives. The character strength that was the biggest predictor of performance was integrity, accounting for just over one-third (33.755%) of the total variance explained by all four character strengths, followed closely by bravery (33.164%) and social intelligence (23.370%).

Integrity mattered more toward the performance of top-level executives than it did for middle-level managers.

Bravery mattered more toward the performance of top-level executives than it did for middle-level managers.

Figure 1

Self-direct report rating discrepancies of integrity as a function of managerial level (middle-level manager versus top-level executive).
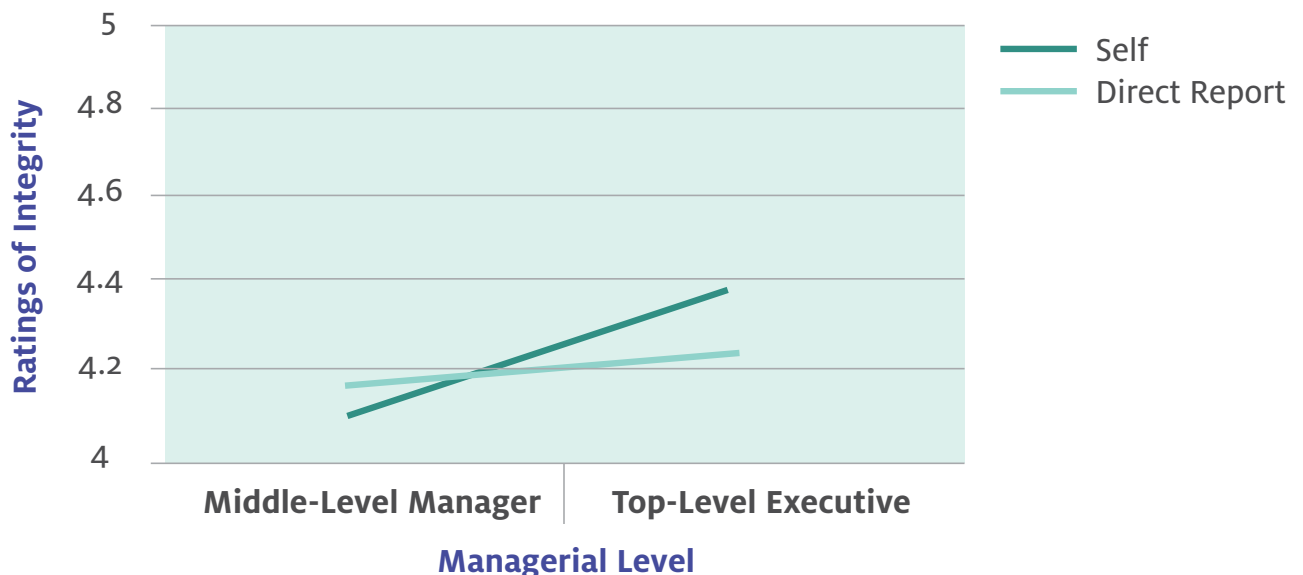
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You can follow Bill on twitter (@Lead_Better) and CCL (@CCLdotORG) as well. Use #1stTimeMgr to continue the conversation online about first-time managers and transitioning into leadership.

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