

INTEGRITY

WITHOUT IT NOTHING WORKS

Excerpt of an interview of Michael Jensen, an economist and former Harvard professor

Integrity is a matter of a person's word – nothing more and nothing less. Michael Jensen explains

Interview by Karen Christensen

Revised March 28, 2014, M. C. Jensen

Question: There is some confusion between the terms integrity, morality and ethics. How do you differentiate them?

These three phenomena are widely understood to provide standards of 'correct' behavior, but people generally get them mixed up. The primary differentiation I make between them is to distinguish integrity from morality and ethics. Integrity is a purely positive proposition. It has nothing to do with good vs. bad. Think for a moment about the Law of Gravity: there is no such thing as 'good' or 'bad' gravity; like integrity, it just 'is'. Morality and ethics, on the other hand, are normative concepts in that they deal with matters of good or bad, right vs. wrong. Morality refers to a society's standards of right and wrong behavior for individuals and groups within that society, while ethics refers to the normative set of values that apply to all members of a group or organization. Thus, both morality and ethics relate to desirable vs. undesirable behavior.

Question: You define integrity as "what it takes for a person to be whole and complete." What does this look like in daily life?

An individual is whole and complete when their word is whole and complete, and their word is whole and complete when they honour their word. We can honour our word in one of two ways: first by keeping our word, and on time; or second, as soon as we know that we won't keep our word, we inform all parties counting on us to keep our word and clean up any mess that we've caused in their lives. When we do this, we are honouring our word despite not having kept it, and we have maintained our integrity.

If you are serious about being a person of integrity, you will think very carefully before giving your word to anyone or anything, and you will never give your word to two or more things that are mutually inconsistent. As they should, many people focus on the importance of keeping their word; however, if one does not consider how to maintain integrity when one cannot or will not keep one's word, this is sure to lead to out-of-integrity behaviour at some point. If you're up to anything important in life, you will not always be able to keep your word, and that's alright, but if you are a person of integrity, you will always honour your word.

Integrity is important to individuals, groups, organizations and society because it creates workability. Without integrity, the workability of any object, system, person, group or organization declines; and as workability declines, the opportunity for performance declines. Therefore, integrity is a necessary condition for maximum performance. As an added benefit, honouring one's word is also an actionable pathway to being trusted by others.

Question: *You believe that a key aspect of integrity involves the relationship one has with oneself. Please explain the importance of this.*

One's word to one's self is a critical part of integrity. The foundation for being a person of integrity is giving your word to yourself (or declaring to yourself) the following. First, "Who I am is my word", and second, "I give my word to myself that I am a person of integrity." Without this foundation you will never be a person of integrity. By not being serious when we give our word to ourselves, we forfeit the opportunity to maintain our integrity by honouring our word to ourselves. For example, think of occasions when the issue of self-discipline comes up, and the ease with which we often dismiss it. It may be something trivial like, 'I'm going to work out tomorrow at nine o'clock', or something more serious like, 'I will never cheat on my wife'. By failing to honour our word to ourselves, not only do we undermine ourselves as persons of integrity, but we diminish who we are as a person – we are less than whole and complete as a person. If we aren't serious about this aspect of integrity, it will create 'unworkability' in our life: we will appear to others as inconsistent, unreliable and unpredictable. You simply cannot be a whole and complete person if you do not honour your word to yourself. Unfortunately, people almost universally justify or rationalize the mess in their lives resulting from their personal out-of-integrity behavior. They point to external causes of the mess in their lives and never acknowledge that the mess arises from their own personal out-of-integrity behavior.