

When You Come to the Fork in the Road...

by

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FORK IN THE ROAD

To quote the wise philosopher Yogi Berra, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it”. If only these journeys were so simple.

The journey I am talking about is the journey of integrity. Keynoter Professor Daniel Wueste has spoken to you about “healthy institutions”. According to Professor Wueste, these are institutions which are “positioned to achieve their purpose or mission”. He goes on to say that “institutional integrity is a necessary condition of institutional health and that the integrity of agents within an institution is a necessary condition of institutional integrity”. I could not agree more, and my paper will attempt to address aspects of both institutional and individual integrity.

Let me begin by briefly commenting on a paper I presented in Hawaii more than a decade ago.

HAWAII VALEDICTORIANS

At the time, the evening daily newspaper, *The Honolulu Star Bulletin*, sponsored a program each year in which valedictorians and salutatorians from each of the State’s high schools came together for a celebrative banquet at one of the plush Waikiki Hotels. These students were accompanied by their parents, favorite teachers, and school principals. One year I was asked to present the keynote address at the banquet.

I asked myself what could I say that would be meaningful to this group of top students? Clearly, they were smart and talented. Obviously, they worked very hard. Furthermore, they had tremendous support from their families and schools.

Should I tell them to study harder? Should I tell them to be sure to truly master the English language? Should I tell them to really understand mathematics? To learn foreign languages? To study art? It seemed to me that an address built around any of these concepts would really not add very much value to these young men and women. Then a thought came to me.

I asked my assistant to take the two previous weeks and comb the morning and evening daily newspapers (excluding the Sports section) and look for examples of ethical abuse or violations of ethical standards. She came back with between two and four separate instances reported each day in the newspaper involving violations of individual and institutional integrity. The violations were found in business organizations, not-for-profit organizations, philanthropic organizations, and churches. Examples were found among doctors, lawyers, politicians, academicians, and priests.

As a next step, we looked into the backgrounds of each of the individuals involved. In virtually every instance, we found that each of the individuals was smart, talented, experienced, and often well-credentialed professionally. We found that each of the individuals worked tirelessly to achieve their level of leadership and influence. We found that along the way, each individual had tremendous support from family, friends, and supporting organizations.

Yet, when these individuals came to their ethical “fork in the road”, they took the wrong branch. I am sure there are many more individuals who took the proper branch than there were who took the wrong branch – unfortunately, we do not often hear very much about these individuals. The individuals who took the wrong branch are newsworthy and this is what media tends to highlight. The damage that these individuals inflicted upon the organizations they represented and the many individuals who were constituents of the organization was enormous.

After presenting examples, I suggested to the young men and women that each of them had probably already come to this fork in the road. They probably had come to it several times. I assumed – I certainly hoped – that they had already taken the proper branch. I suggested that during the course of their lives and careers, they would come to this fork in the road numerous times. I said that I truly believed that most of them would take the proper branch each time. If they hesitated for a moment somewhere along the road, I asked them to consider the fact that people before them who were just as smart, hardworking, and supported, were now suffering embarrassment, loss of job and status, fines, and even imprisonment.

I assumed they would wish to avoid these consequences. Even more importantly, I hoped that they would want to do the “right thing” because that is what good people – that is, ethical people with integrity – do. And, as I will argue along the way today, individual and organizational success are built through integrity. As I say to the Executive MBA class at RIT that I have addressed each of the past 13 years, “Good business is good ethics and good ethics is good business”.

Of course, our young men and women would be served so much better if they had role models exhibiting integrity. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. For example, just a few weeks ago, it was reported that school teachers in Texas – approximately 400 of them – conspired with their principals to enable students to cheat on State exams. Sometimes, teachers put the answers on the board. Sometimes, they walked among the students and stood behind them as the students were working on a problem, indicating by their behavior whether the answers the students had selected were right or wrong. For instance, when the students selected an answer that was correct, the teacher then moved on. Many of the teachers were under orders from the principals to do what they had to do to get the scores up. What brought on this behavior? You can guess: the “root of all evil”. In this case, some of the principals would receive a \$5000 bonus if the scores went up. In some cases, the district superintendents were offered a \$20,000 bonus if the scores went up.

My heart goes out to these students. What kind of a chance do they have in life with this kind of role modeling and these kinds of teachers? Would they carry this example forward as they prepare for the LSAT and MEDCAT exams? When they take the bar and State medical exams? When they work to dispense justice and to heal sick people?

I think that many people do many good things in their lifetimes. And there are many more people who do good things than people who do bad things. But the harm done by the few has significant impact on the many.

Why is this the case and what can we do about it? I will talk a little bit today to “what we can do about it”, and leave the “why” for another time.

LEADERSHIP

I do not think you can talk about institutional integrity without talking about the individuals who lead institutions.

I believe that successful leaders have the following attributes. They work hard. They are smart, talented, and knowledgeable. They know how to work in teams and groups – this means they are good followers as well as leaders. They possess strong and effective communication skills. They are loyal to their institution’s mission, to the constituencies served by the institution, and to their colleagues and the employees who collectively carry out the institution’s mission.

There is one other attribute which a successful leader must possess. It is the most important of all the attributes. It is individual integrity. To follow Professor Wueste, you cannot achieve institutional integrity unless you have individual integrity throughout the organization, and individual integrity starts with the leadership of the organization.

And why is that so? In my view, institutional integrity is based on trust. Individuals served by the institution and individuals who work for the institution must trust the institution. This means they must trust the leadership of the institution and the individuals who carry out the work of the institution. Trust is achieved when the institution, and especially the individuals who lead it, say what they mean and mean what they say. Importantly, what they promise actually happens. Appropriate processes are developed and established in ways that instill trust, and promised outcomes are achieved. All constituencies of the institution know and understand the process and the outcomes.

I talked, above, about individuals who took the wrong fork in the road. Let me cite below, for purposes of illustration, a few of the more recent examples of failed integrity.

GENERAL EXAMPLES

If we look at the public payroll and nepotism, we can see the hand-picked successor of a former U.S. Senator from Alaska (who was elected Governor of Alaska and, thus, was entitled to appoint his Senate replacement). He stated that the individual he selected “shared the same vision for Alaska and the same values as he”. She was his daughter.

Similarly, a Senator from Kentucky, after a similar State-wide search, participated in a search process (he did not recuse himself) which was reviewing candidates for an appellate judgeship. The Senator interviewed the eleven finalists and, together with Senate colleagues, identified the final three. His son was one of those who made that cut. However, the American Bar Association found the son to be unqualified due to his lack of experience and had serious

doubts about his intellectual and professional abilities. Nonetheless, the Senator's colleagues confirmed the son.¹

In the arena of philanthropic fundraising, all of us – and this is a challenge that I face consistently – are faced with the dilemma of how to finance fundraising events for worthy causes. Sometimes the organizer is motivated primarily to beat the glamour of the last time it was done. Sometimes the egos of the individual take hold and they want to have the fundraising event prettier and grander than ever before so they can take kudos about how wonderful the food and entertainment were. As a consequence, this competitive spirit and ego gratification yield net revenues for the philanthropic purpose being served which are far less than would otherwise be the case. Yet everyone seems to feel good about it. Should they?

Of course, we have the examples which have dominated the news so much for the past couple of years that the following firms have become household names: Adelphia, American International Group, Arthur Andersen, Enron, Global Crossing, ImClone, NY Stock Exchange, Qwest, Reciprocal of America, and Tyco.

What do we do about this? To take a quote from a recent conference²: “Baking business integrity into every aspect of your DNA in your operations will be the only way you can build a successful, competitive, profitable, and sustainable enterprise. The issues of business performance and business integrity are becoming inextricably linked”. A second speaker at the conference stated that “ethical leadership centers around our corporate values, and we see it as being very central to the tone set up at the top”.

Following this approach, the Chairman of the Security Exchange Commission recently stated at a conference³: “The overarching theme for our efforts are ethics and integrity. Our rules have, at their core, a purpose of promoting honest and ethical behavior in the marketplace. They demand that market participants provide complete and accurate information about their activities and practices, so that others can make informed decisions about whether to invest or whether to deal with particular market participants”. Should we believe that he means this? I think so. Can we believe that it will happen? I think we can – most of the time but not all of the time.

But there are some unsettling data afoot.

¹ Turley, Jonathan “Commentary; Public Payroll: A Family Affair: Nepotism in Washington Poses a Threat to Institutional Integrity”, *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 2003, p. B11.

² Rotman School Conference (Toronto, Canada), April 8, 2005.

³ SCC Speaks Conference, March 4, 2005.

SURVEY DATA

According to a *Fast Company* magazine report, 93% of 40,000 Americans surveyed admitted to lying regularly at work. According to a survey by Walker Information and the Hudson Institute, 60% of employees who saw or knew about an ethical violation in their company have not reported it. According to a survey by OfficeClick.com, 47% of the 148 secretaries to Fortune 1000 CEO's said that they had been asked to lie by their boss.

What forces these results? I said we would not talk about the “why” of lack of integrity. However, perhaps a few comments can be made in passing⁴. I will suggest, briefly, some factors which bring about a lack of integrity because I shall refer to them later. First, we have the impact of culture, where “bending the rules can become legendary”. Second, we could have poorly designed systems which by their nature promote lack of integrity. Third, lack of resources combined with the need to produce results can lead to cutting corners and dishonesty. Fourth, blind loyalty by subordinates, who do not question the consequences of the actions they are asked to undertake by their leaders, can be damaging. And fifth, the need to build reputation immediately to promote the desired image, whether or not it is deserved, can be deadly.

Of course, there are many other reasons. Some of the factors I have identified above can be debated extensively. I select those examples because of the discussion that will follow.

The discussion with which I choose to end this paper relates directly to RIT. I believe we are an institution of integrity. I take pride in the ethics of the individuals who make up this great organization. I also acknowledge that there is always room for improvement. Examples I cite in what follows will reflect some of these challenges and accomplishments.

RIT CHALLENGES AND EXAMPLES

Student Success

For thirteen years, whenever I have had the opportunity, I have consistently stated that RIT is *for* the students, *by* the faculty, *with* the support of the staff, *in* concert with the leadership of the administration, and *under* the fiduciary responsibility of the trustees. Our first Strategic Plan, encompassing the period 1994 – 2004, spoke strongly to the centrality of the students and their success. The current Strategic Plan (2005 – 2015) speaks strongly to the same theme. Faculty, staff, administration, and trustees support this goal totally. For years, these university constituents have spoken proudly about RIT's focus on student success. There were always students who reaffirmed our assumption that we were accomplishing our goal.

As it turned out, there were also students who felt disappointment and disdain with what they were experiencing on numerous fronts. For many years, as an institution, we did not seem to listen. One manifestation of our unwillingness to listen or inability to act is the fact that the

⁴ Pennington, R. “Institutional Integrity”, *Executive Excellence*, May 2000.

graduation rate for our students over a 7-year period (recognizing that our students take an extra year to graduate because of our co-op program) was unacceptably in the low 60 percentiles. Almost 40% of the freshmen who entered never graduated.

Clearly, students did not enroll at RIT, instead of at other universities to which they were admitted, in order not to graduate. Certainly that was not the intent of their parents either. These low retention rates persisted for many years with no attempt to improve them or even acknowledge that they existed. In this regard, I would give RIT extremely low grades on institutional integrity.

Some say that students were not well prepared or were not willing to work hard enough given the rigorous academic demands placed upon them. Yet, our students were averaging more than 1220 on their SAT exams, and came to us, on average, with an 89.1 grade point average. Thirty percent were in the top 10% of their class and 54% in the top 20%. We routinely rejected thousands of students who applied for admission, selecting only the best of the best.

Eventually, we recognized and – more importantly – acknowledged the problem. We set to work to address it. For example, we have revised the pedagogy and curriculum in Calculus, Physics, and Chemistry. We have introduced a First-Year Experience curriculum and in the coming year will have freshmen organized into 28 Learning Communities. We have added an Honors program. An Early Alert program has been introduced for all students who are in academic difficulty early on in the quarter. A College Restoration program is available. We have insisted upon and are evaluating academic advising. The Student Ombuds Office is becoming increasingly active. Centers have been created to support Students in Transition. Extracurricular programs in leadership and in community and campus engagement have been introduced. We are spending approximately \$8 million a year on these and other programs that I will not take the time to mention here. Our goal is to achieve within a couple of years a student retention rate of 75% on the way to 90%. Results to-date show that we are on track.

I believe we have exhibited a lack of institutional integrity in this critical area for many years. Fortunately, I also believe that recently our institutional integrity has increased significantly because of programs like the ones I just mentioned. I will not say that we have achieved institutional integrity in this most important aspect of everything we do until we reach our targeted retention rates.

Intercollegiate Athletics

RIT is a Division III university. We offer twenty-four intercollegiate sports, twelve for men and twelve for women. In the coming year, we will be moving our men's hockey team to Division I.

It is my view that many Division I universities have compromised their institutional integrity in order to achieve successful intercollegiate athletic programs. It does not have to be this way.

For example, the grade point average of RIT's athletes is, on average, greater than the grade point average of the campus as a whole. The majors taken by the athletes mirror the majors taken by the campus as a whole. The graduation rates of athletes on average exceed the graduation rates of the campus as a whole. Twenty-two of the twenty-four intercollegiate athletic teams have grade point averages higher than the campus as a whole.

Interestingly, one of the two intercollegiate teams which has a grade point average lower than the campus as a whole is the men's hockey team, which has the lowest grade point average of all the athletic teams. Moving to Division I will mean that the men's hockey team will play approximately 12 – 15 more games, and it will play these games over a much wider geographical area, meaning there will be more time away from class. There will be more stress and competition for the athletes. Where is institutional integrity in all of this?

The Vice President for Student Affairs and I have an agreement with the athletic director and the hockey coach that his team will achieve a grade point average equal to at least the campus as a whole over the next several years. It is on the basis of that commitment that we are moving to Division I in hockey. This team will be a test case for us. RIT will not become one of those universities which exploit athletes for the glory and image of the university-at-large. I am encouraged by the fact that already the grade point average of the men's hockey team has risen several tenths of a point in just a couple of quarters. If the grade point average falls, I am fully prepared to pull the plug on the team and I believe the players and the coach know this. They also made a commitment to me that this would not happen and I believe them.

Diversity

We hear from time to time that increasing the diversity of the students, faculty, and staff can only be accomplished by lowering quality. If that were the case, I would say that institutional integrity is compromised. Again, I do not believe it has to be that way.

In fact, I argue strongly that by increasing diversity, we increase the quality of the students, faculty, and staff. There are two ways in which this happens. The first way, one which is cited quite often, is that if you have a more diverse campus, everyone benefits from a multicultural experience. Student success in life and career after the university is enhanced because of their increased understanding, network, and comfort level with regard to interactions with people of different cultures. Of course, I agree fully with this point of view.

There is a second point of view. For example, if we select students, faculty, or staff from a predominantly white male pool, we will have a smaller number from which to select than if the pool included women. Moreover, if we now include individuals of color, the pool from which we select students, faculty, and staff will be larger yet. If we are color and gender blind as we evaluate individuals based on the criteria we have established, we will routinely end up with more women and people of color if we utilize the larger pools. The quality of the university is enhanced as a result of this more broadly selective process. The challenge, then, is to work as hard as we possibly can to make sure that women and people of color are identified, persuaded to allow themselves to be considered, and are fairly and objectively assessed. If we do not follow this process, I submit that we have diminished our institutional integrity because we

have not only restricted access for qualified individuals but have, in the process, reduced the quality from what it might have been. I do not believe we need court decisions to guide us. We simply need to insist upon institutional integrity. I have given RIT, and others outside of the university have given RIT, high grades in this regard, I am proud to say.

Ph.D. Programs

There are examples of research universities which denigrate undergraduate programs in order to support graduate programs; which pay lip service to teaching while rewarding research; and which place undergraduate students low in the pecking order in comparison to graduate students. When this happens, again I believe institutional integrity has been compromised. Of course, it does not have to be this way.

Then there are universities which claim to focus on students and teaching, and that leaves them no time for scholarship and research. Again, I believe this approach compromises institutional integrity. How can you teach well when the information you are sharing is out-of-date and when the process of research is not utilized as a key tool to promote the students' ability to learn, particularly to learn on their own? But it does not have to be that way.

Key to the current RIT Strategic Plan is a commitment to scholarship. This means that every faculty member in every course is expected to be at least on the frontier of knowledge in his or her field. This means faculty must read the journals and attend the professional conferences in their field. Their syllabi should reflect the content of the current journals. Moreover, given RIT's career focus, faculty are responsible for being aware of corporate challenges and practices.

In addition, there will be selected areas of strength within the university which will establish Ph.D. programs. It is expected that faculty members in these programs will incorporate in their teaching not only what is on the frontier of knowledge, but will present what the next frontier might be. In particular, they will be talking about the new frontiers that they are creating. In this way, teaching and learning for all students is enriched as faculty routinely incorporate their scholarship and research into their course syllabi, team projects, and classroom discussion.

Every faculty member in the Ph.D. programs is expected to teach undergraduate courses. Every faculty member in Ph.D. programs will be evaluated on their teaching and held to exactly the same standards for excellence in teaching as faculty members who are not involved in a Ph.D. program. Undergraduate student success will be the prime driver at the university. In situations in which there is a necessary trade-off in terms of resource allocation or promotion and tenure, excellence in teaching undergraduates will take priority over research grants and publication.

Most faculty at RIT believe this can be accomplished. Most faculty applaud this goal. However, there are faculty who properly raise the issue of whether we will actually monitor what I have just said to be sure that it actually occurs. Will teaching and learning at the undergraduate level actually be significantly enriched over what it would otherwise be because of the substantial scholarship and research of the faculty? The answer is "yes", if this goal is

engrained in the culture of RIT. The leadership of RIT is committed to establishing this culture in the years ahead.

Trust and Shared Governance

As we said earlier, the foundation stone for institutional integrity is trust. The individuals the institution serves and the individuals who make the university run have to have trust in the integrity of the institution as a whole. Ultimately, this comes down to trust in the leadership of the university. My colleagues in leadership roles at RIT and I have tried to earn this trust through the adoption of “shared governance” as the basis upon which decisions are made and actions taken. Shared governance for us means that whenever an individual or a group will be affected in a significant way by a decision or action that is being contemplated, that individual or group will be consulted ahead of time. Their input will be listened to carefully and will help to shape the decision or action. After listening to all their input and debating it thoroughly in appropriate settings, a penultimate statement of the decision or action will be made available to the individual or group affected. They will have the opportunity to voice their view of the consequences of the decision or action being contemplated.

Again, this input will be carefully considered. Then the decision will be made. The rationale underlying the decision will be explained thoroughly. In some cases, there will be unanimous agreement. In other cases, there will be a consensus. There will be situations in which the individual or the majority of the people in the group do not concur in a decision. At least they will know that they had an opportunity to influence the decision and they will know the reason for the decision. It is expected that the individual or group affected will support the decision going forward.

It takes time for this concept of shared governance to permeate the institution and become part of the culture. Through effective shared governance, trust can be achieved. There will be times when the shared governance process will become boisterous and even acrimonious. In the end, we would hope and expect that civility, courtesy, mutual respect, and professionalism will prevail.

Where does this all take us? What are the lessons to be learned?

Basically, everyone throughout the institution – leaders and followers – must listen to one another. There must be openness. Ironically, there should be an attitude that bad news, while unfortunate and disappointing, is in a sense welcome because it presents an opportunity for individuals to work together to solve a problem.

Let me conclude with some recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Immediately above we talked about the critical importance of achieving trust throughout the institution, especially at the leadership levels. A factor that can undermine trust, perhaps

more than any other, has been termed the “Dean’s Disease”⁵. This article is written by a faculty member with distinguished academic credentials who, I would conjecture, really dislikes (and that is a polite term) deans. In any event, he discusses the “metamorphic effects of power” and cites, for support, Lord Acton’s admonition that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. He argues that the possession and exercise of power over time changes the Dean’s view of himself/herself and of others. The Dean’s decisions can become ego-driven as opposed to fact-driven. Rewards and punishments are distributed according to personal and political preference as opposed to objective analysis related to the effective pursuit of the institute purpose, and so on. The use of the position of “Dean” is really a surrogate for “Leader”.

To come full circle, my concluding point is one which agrees with Professor Wueste. An institution’s integrity depends on the integrity of its leaders. If they cannot generate trust because they have contracted “Dean’s disease”, then there will be no institutional integrity.

What do you do? We have discussed some of the things, including:

- Establishing institutional values for which there is consensus among institutional constituencies.
- Motivating independent thought where disagreement is not only permissible but encouraged (that is, encouraged up to a point, the point at which a decision is necessarily made).
- Developing a culture in which there is mutual respect and in which all constituents at the institution take real pride in the accomplishments of one another. I am proud to say I believe we have achieved a good measure of this at RIT.
- Communicating – formally and informally - extensively throughout the institution. Leaders should be accessible to their constituents.
- Listening both by leaders and by people who are expected to carry out the decisions of leaders.
- Making decisions not on the basis of the power of the decision-maker to take the action, but out of respect for the process which leads to the decision and for the credibility of the people involved in decision-making.
- Establishing a clear-cut unity of purpose for the institution in general. There does not need to be an agreement on each tactic and maybe even on each strategy. However, there should be concurrence on the goals of the institution.

⁵ Bedeian, A., “Dean’s Disease: How the Darker Side of Power Manifests Itself in the Office of Dean”, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, December 2004, pp. 164 – 173.

- Initiating a full and honest review of performance of everyone in the institution by individuals appropriate for undertaking the assessment. In other words, establish accountability throughout the institution.
- Talking about integrity and trust often.
- Communicating expectations and developing the skills of faculty and staff.
- Finally, being realistic. While it is appropriate and even desired to have stretch goals for the university looking ahead, there needs to be a realistic view of the feasibility of attaining these goals. While it is wonderful to stretch the institution so it can realize its full potential and become even greater than anyone would have thought, if leaders get too far ahead of the university constituents, they will lose credibility and, thereby, trust.

I hope there is enough here to foster a discussion which I very much look forward to. Thank you for your attention.

