Pennington on Leadership

By Randy G. Pennington

Texas Town & City is proud to introduce a continuing series written by a longtime and greatly admired friend of the Texas Municipal League. A frequent speaker at TML education events, Randy combines more than twenty years of front-line leadership and consulting experience with extensive research and writing to deliver practical ideas that can be applied at many levels. His expertise has made him an internationally respected guest commentator, with appearances on CNN, PBS, Fox News, the ABC Radio Network, and the BBC. He is also a prolific writer, and his ideas have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Entrepreneur, Executive Excellence, Training & Development*, numerous newspapers, and many professional/trade association journals.

Integrity-Driven Cities: How to Win the Battle for Trust

"We don't trust them."

Those were the words used by a group of concerned citizens to describe how they felt about their elected officials. Only months earlier, the same officials had used the phrase to describe their colleagues on the City Council who did not share their views on a controversial subject. On another front, the city staff wondered if Council could be trusted to support them as they stepped up enforcement of code violations, and several Council members privately discussed their concerns that staff might not be giving them all the information they needed to make the best decisions.

The absence of trust is the friction that prevents individuals and groups from working together toward a common cause. It causes people to question everything and believe nothing. The result is everyone protecting their own self-interests to the detriment of the community's greater needs.

Feelings of mistrust spring from questions about character, competency, consistency, communication, and courage. Is this person withholding information? Is that person competent to make a good decision? Why is there inconsistency between word and deed? Did that person lie to me to gain an unfair benefit, or was it a simple mistake? Will this group have the political will to support publicly what they have acknowledged privately?

Is mistrust a problem in your city?

You decide. What would be different if everyone involved in making, influencing, and implementing decisions in our city could be trusted to do what they were supposed to do, when they were supposed to do it, and the way it is supposed to be done? If the difference would be noticeable, you have a problem.

Here's the news: the issues facing communities today are more challenging and potentially divisive than at any time in recent memory. Logic dictates that not everyone will agree on every decision. Our responsibility demands that the citizens we serve and colleagues with whom we interact, both elected and appointed, have the right to trust us. Your community cannot afford the distraction that occurs when others doubt your integrity.

What is Integrity

For many, the word **integrity** is synonymous with **ethics**. That is a critical piece of it, but integrity goes beyond personal or organizational character to include competence and consistency.

Webster's **New World Dictionary** defines integrity as, "the quality or state of being complete; wholeness; the quality or state of being unimpaired; and being of sound moral principle."

Leaders and organizations adopting this broader definition deliver integrity in their products, services, and relationships. They:

- make every decision on the basis of what's right rather than who's right
- provide quality services and embrace continuous improvement in all performance areas because it is their obligation to those they serve
- maintain a culture where ethical behavior and doing what is right is expected and rewarded
- operate in an open, transparent manner with all constituencies
- deliver on promises (implied and explicit) to all constituent groups
- comply with the spirit of applicable regulations rather than the minimum requirements
- ensure accountability for integrity at every level of the organization

As a result, they experience…

- enhanced reputation
- the ability to openly discuss substantive issues without fear of reprisal
- increased morale, commitment, and productivity
- improved resource utilization
- confidence in compliance with laws and regulations
- more effective response to crisis situations

How Integrity-Driven Leaders and Organizations are Different

All great leaders create focus with clear goals and high expectations. They expect results, and they ensure effective execution of well-designed strategies. Integrity-driven leaders simply approach their leadership responsibilities from a different perspective.

Their power comes from trust rather than fear. They pay attention to relationships as well as results, and they stress credibility rather than control. As a result, they generate confidence from others instead of skepticism and cynicism.

Stephen Carter asserts in his book, *Integrity*, that we admire integrity in our leaders because of their forthrightness, steadfastness, consistency, compassion, and the reliability of their commitments.

Leaders, organizations, and communities operating with a heightened sense of integrity are no less focused on results. They simply understand that short-term results without the long-term trust from all stakeholders create an environment where on-going success is not sustainable.

That makes the quest for integrity – as defined by Webster – the most important goal to which every community can aspire.

Are You Integrity-Driven?

Complete the assessment below to determine if your Council and/or organization are laying the foundation for integrity. Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 with "5" being *excellent* and "1" being *needs improvement.*

Decisions are made based on "what's right for all parties" and not on the basis of tradition, expediency, or political positioning.	3
People at all levels of the organization clearly understand what is expected of them in areas of productivity, quality, service, job performance, and integrity.	…
Telling the truth is rewarded. The organization does not shoot messengers or avoid the truth to protect the illusion of success.	…

Leaders and managers are held accountable for the manner in which results are achieved in addition to the results themselves.	... ▼
The organization's leaders set a good example of integrity.	... ▼
Individuals are rewarded for their performance that demonstrates integrity.	... ▼
The organization deals swiftly with individual performance that violates the trust of others.	... ▼
The organization has a reputation for honesty and living its values.	... ▼
Everyone is united behind a common mission and vision that promotes integrity in products, services, and relationships.	... ▼
The organization acts responsibly toward the welfare of the community as a whole.	... ▼

SCORING

- If your score is 40 or above, you are doing a terrific job of demonstrating your integrity. There may be a few areas you want to fine tune, but you are doing well.
- If you scored between 30 and 40, you're doing a good job overall, but there are probably a few specific areas on which you should work.
- If your organization scored below 30, it is time to take immediate steps to improve your performance. The constituents you serve will appreciate your effort, and your organization will become more effective.

Making Integrity a Way of Life

A decision to make integrity the cornerstone of your organization's operation begins with the leader and is driven throughout the organization by performance and execution. Here are seven strategies to help you start and continue your journey.

1. **State your expectations clearly.** Everyone must understand your expectations and their contribution to driving integrity through every aspect of your operation. Communicate in an open, honest manner so everyone knows their obligation to citizens and each other. Avoid hype. Admit that you are constantly working on your own performance, and ask for everyone's commitment to becoming a city that demonstrates integrity in word and deed.

2. **Pay attention to structure and processes.** Structure and systems create habits that ensure consistency when human breakdowns occur. A seminar participant made the case for aligning structure and processes with these words, "how do they expect us to trust them when the policies say one thing, but we are asked to do something different every day."

   Everything is ultimately connected. The integrity of the whole is called into questions when we see inconsistencies among the various parts. Less than transparent governance on one issue influences attitudes and perceptions on every issue. Allowing disrespectful treatment of employees in one area eventually affects other areas. Each area of the operation should be evaluated by the following questions: Are we doing what we said we would do? Are we providing what we said we would provide? Are we operating in a manner that builds trust with those we serve?

3. **Create accountability and rewards.** Acting with integrity must mean something. Deal quickly with those who violate the organization's standards. And remember that fear of consequences can also create an environment where individuals work to avoid getting caught. Make honoring commitments and the ability to build trust among diverse groups a criterion for promotion. Recognize and reward those who demonstrate their integrity in a difficult situation, even when the result is not as you would have hoped. Behavior that is recognized is repeated.

4. **Provide the skills and tools to put principles into practice.** Even the best system can malfunction or be improved. People create systems, and good intentions can go awry when either skills or tools are absent. Start with

the Council and city leadership. Then move through the entire organization.

5. **Talk about integrity often.** How often do you speak about your organization's key performance results and budget? How often do you speak about the importance of integrity in your long-term success? Hanging a values statement on the wall and distributing wallet cards are not enough. Very few take the time to stand in the hallway or search their wallets to read the values statement when they face a difficult choice. Don't start a new program. Create stories and legends about those who achieved superior results while modeling integrity. Talk about the challenges of earning and maintaining the trust of others. The more attention leaders give to the importance of integrity, the more important it will become in the organization.

6. **Welcome bad news.** The test of a healthy organization is not the absence of problems. It is the ability to address them in a positive manner. The permission to share bad news without fear of retribution promotes an honest, open environment that continually strives to improve. As good as your organization is today; there is a strong chance that someone is withholding information that can make it even better.

7. **Don't forget personal leadership.** Leadership is about the ability to influence. Nothing more and nothing less. Leadership has very little to do with position and everything to do with your ability to influence others. Everyone is watching. They judge the sincerity of your actions very quickly and will take their support elsewhere unless they see integrity in your performance.

   All leadership begins with personal leadership. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said of a guest, "The louder he spoke of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons." That statement is as relevant today as it was when it was first made in 1860. Who we are – at our core – matters just as much as the ability to communicate, make good decisions, or implement sound practices.

The great American statesman Henry Clay said, "Government is a trust, and the officers of government are trustees, and both the trust and the trustees are created for the benefit of the people."

The continued success and survival of our municipal organizations and communities as a whole depends on creating relationships. There can be no transformation without trust, and no trust without integrity.

Randy Pennington helps leaders create cultures focused on results, relationships, and accountability. He is author of *Results Rule! Build a Culture that Blows the Competition Away* and *On My Honor, I Will: Leading with Integrity In Changing Times*. For additional information, contact him at 972-980-9857, randy@penningtongroup.com, www.penningtongroup-cities.com, or www.resultsrule.com.