How Valuable is Integrity for Mid- and Top-Level Executives?

Key Concept
Too many headlines in recent years have paid testament to the fact that leaders can be prone to ethical lapses. Perhaps this is why integrity is today, more than ever, considered to be a fundamental character strength for managers at all levels of an organization. In this Idea, however, integrity is shown to be relatively less important for middle-level executives compared to other character strengths, such as social intelligence.

Idea Summary
Integrity — defined as the ability to act with honesty and strong moral principles — is often considered a crucial character strength for top executives. But what about middle-level executives? These managers are in line for top-level leadership positions in future, and play a vital role in any organization, from leading many different people and operations, acting as mediators between organizational levels and functional units, to formulating and implementing strategic plans, and much more. Understanding which character strengths are particularly beneficial for enhancing middle-level manager performance is just as important as it is for top executives.

Researchers, including William Gentry and Kristin Cullen from the Center for Creative Leadership, set out to examine whether middle-level managers’ behavioural manifestations of integrity related to ratings of their performance. In addition to integrity, they also looked at the character strengths of bravery, perspective, and social intelligence.

They found that in the case of middle-managers, social intelligence was the most important predictor of performance. The latter was the least important as a predictor of good performance. In the case of top executives, on the other hand, both bravery and integrity were significantly more important than for middle-managers.

Another finding of the study was that executives tend to overrate their own integrity, especially if they have been promoted to a top-level position; they may reason that had there been a moral deficit in their character, they would not have been promoted. Such a blind-spot may partly explain the ethical failures of some corporate leaders in recent years.

Methodology: Gentry et al collected data from 246 managers attending a leadership development program between November 2007 and October 2011. They represented at least 150 organizations, with an average tenure of just over 14 years in their organization. In order to compare these middle-level managers to top-level executives, the researchers also used a sample of 191
top-level executives (i.e. CEOs, CFOs, Presidents, etc.).

Before attending the program, each manager selected co-workers to complete Executive Dimensions® (an online multisource feedback instrument), which measures a participant’s standing on a broad array of individual leadership competencies.

**Business Application**

Due to the varied roles and responsibilities of middle-managers, though integrity is most-often cited as the crucial character strength for all executives, Gentry et al’s research indicate that middle-managers may be better in their current job by prioritizing social intelligence instead. Aspects of social intelligence may help them navigate tricky organizational politics and build networks necessary for promotions, particularly because they have to deal with a variety of different constituencies on a daily basis due to their position at the middle of organizations.

Nevertheless, the researchers encourage managers to undertake initiatives aimed at improving their integrity, as once middle-managers move up to top-level positions, integrity becomes highly relevant and important for job performance. However, organizations should also take a proactive part in making sure that other character strengths, such as social intelligence are targeted parts of their developmental experience.

Integrity can be developed by keeping confidences, taking responsibility, using mentors or coaches to help understand how integrity comes across in individual or group settings. To develop greater social intelligence, managers can use feedback via videotaped or role-play exercises to better understand their verbal and nonverbal behaviours and those of others.

**Further Reading**

- Integrity’s Place among the Character Strengths of Middle-Level Managers and Top Level Executives. William A. Gentry, Kristin L. Cullen, John J. Sosik, Jae Uk Chun, Christopher R. Leupold & Scott Tonidandel. *The Leadership Quarterly* (June 2013).

**Further Relevant Resources**

- William A. Gentry’s profile at the Center for Creative Leadership
- Kristin L. Cullen’s profile at the Center for Creative Leadership
- John J. Sosik’s profile at Pennsylvania State University
- Christopher R. Leupold’s profile at Elon University
- Scott Tonidandel’s profile at Davidson College
- Center for Creative Leadership’s profile at IEDP

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