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3rd Place Essay: What is the Role of Integrity in Leadership?

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What is the Role of Integrity in Leadership?

By: Michelle Pinkney

Warren Buffett—billionaire, philanthropist, investor, and businessman—once made the statement, “In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if they don’t have the first, the other two will kill you.” This idea extends far beyond employees and, in fact, is especially true of leaders. When considering people in leadership, energy and intelligence are vital, but if they do not first and foremost possess a deep sense of personal integrity, those otherwise positive qualities can do great harm to the organization and people they represent. Integrity, defined by Oxford Dictionary as “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles” is all about an individual’s character, and is the foundation from which all of a person’s other actions stem. With this in mind, it is safe to say that without integrity a leader cannot expect to have long-term success or the respect that comes with it. For people in positions of leadership—citizens who are often under more intense supervision and scrutiny than the average person—maintaining personal integrity can spare an entire organization from the serious consequences of a leader’s missteps.

Take David Petraeus, for example, who was named “one of America’s top leaders” by *U.S. News & World Report* in 2005 and “one of the most influential leaders and revolutionaries of the year” by *Time* magazine in 2007. Petraeus graduated in the top five percent of his class from the United States Military Academy before serving the United States in various leadership roles ranging from four-star general to director of the CIA. While Petraeus’s life has been full of public accolades and recognition for his accomplishments, he now is widely known for his resignation from the CIA upon the discovery of his extramarital affair with his biographer.

Because of this big stain on his record, he may be remembered by history not for his work in the U.S. government, but for his personal mistake that resulted in a highly public examination of his record and the agency he directed. At the beginning of his appointment as director of the CIA, it seemed that Petraeus's intelligence and experience in leadership would allow him to be successful in his role as director, and to be a beneficial addition to the agency. However, his lack of integrity not only resulted in an ugly end to an impressive career, but brought embarrassment and judgment on him personally, on the CIA, and even on the nation as it considers whether one government official's personal decisions can threaten national security.

As the Petraeus case illustrates, integrity is a very valuable part of leadership and should be expected of our leaders in order to prevent the snowball effect of lies, cover ups, and embarrassment that affects countless people through a leader's sphere of influence—not just the person who lacked the integrity to make better decisions. In fact, integrity should not be viewed just as a key element of leadership, but the very foundation of *good* leadership. People watch leaders very closely. Even if they are supreme leaders with numerous honors to their name, one lapse of integrity can throw their whole legacy into question, and have consequences that long outlast their own careers and lives.