

An Ethical Dilemma: Keeping Commitments

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“Integrity is the most valuable and respected quality of leadership. Always keep your word.” (Tracy, 2020) This quote by author and motivational speaker Brian Tracy is a succinct reminder that a person should never make a commitment they do not intend to keep. While this is a worthy goal, the implication that keeping every commitment we make is indelible to integrity is problematic. Such an interpretation makes no allowance for the ever-changing nature of circumstances and priorities in a person’s life. When Mr. Tracy suggests that we always keep our word, to whom does he refer? Do we keep our word to ourselves or to others without regard to self-interest? Is it even possible to keep *every* commitment we make, and if it isn’t, does that mean not one of us has integrity? While it is true that those with integrity stand out as collaborators and valuable leaders, the idea that integrity and self-interest are mutually exclusive is false.

Consider the following example. Jamie has applied for two jobs: one at Apple and one at Microsoft. After several rounds of interviews with both companies, Jamie received an offer from Microsoft. Though Microsoft is not her preferred employer, and the salary is not particularly good, Jamie’s financial circumstances impel her to verbally commit herself to Microsoft when an offer from Apple does not seem forthcoming. But before Jamie begins her employment, a call comes. Apple would like to hire Jamie, and her base salary will be 15% higher than what Microsoft has offered. Jamie now faces an ethical dilemma. She has made a verbal commitment to work for Microsoft, and she wants to act with integrity; what should she do? One option is for Jamie to withdraw her commitment to Microsoft and accept the job from Apple. The commitment was only verbal and not contractual. However, some might say a verbal commitment should be as binding as a written contract, as discussed by (Michael et al, 2016), “a commitment is a relation among at least one committed agent, at least one agent to whom the

commitment has been made, and an action which the committed agent is obligated to perform because she has given assurance to the second agent that she will do so.” Regardless of whether a verbal commitment should be considered a binding contract, in Jamie’s case, it is not. There will be no legal ramifications if she withdraws her commitment, but there may be other consequences. Jamie would be dampening her job prospects should she ever reconsider and wish to work for Microsoft again. One might also argue that in choosing to rescind her commitment, she is reducing her inclination to act with integrity in the future. For instance (Dunn, 2009) states that, “These admirable traits and abilities [of integrity] become a matter of habit, honed through practice. . . in spite of difficult social context(s).” But does it follow that Jamie is not acting with integrity if she trades Microsoft for Apple? Is it ethical for Jamie to neglect her own interests? What if the larger salary allows her to get out of debt sooner, install a security system to protect her family, or hire an in-home nurse instead of sending a parent to a nursing home? What about the commitments that Jamie has made to herself and her family? Puka (2005) describes being ethical by using the term “response-ability” which he says, “accords our role in relationships more due and allows us to see responsibility as the ability to respond to others – to respond well *and* [emphasis added] self-gratifyingly” (p.22). Thus, self-interest is not inherently unethical. More often, it is how we seek to gratify self-interest that proves unethical.

To illustrate, Jamie could use the higher salary offered by Apple as leverage to obtain a salary match from Microsoft. In this way, she could keep her word to work for Microsoft but make a more substantial amount. However, where is the merit in Jamie’s keeping her word if it is only due to mercenary tactics? Is it ethical for Jamie to attempt to coerce Microsoft into compliance by threatening withdrawal, even considering her financial circumstances? No. That is because integrity is the foundation by which ethical conduct is measured, and integrity springs

from the root word ‘integer,’ which means whole. It denotes a thing that is complete in itself. Yet this definition applies not only to things but to people. Thus, integrity can never be *only* about altruism. It is about balance and integration between self and others. Furrow (2005) expounds on this idea by stating that integrity is “the extent to which our various commitments form a harmonious, intact whole” (p.136). I would add that integrity is the extent to which we *strive* to have our various commitments form a harmonious, intact whole. For no person can keep every commitment they make, just as it is impossible to foresee every consequence that will arise when we keep one commitment at the expense of another. It is left to the individual to weigh the demands of self-interest and self-sacrifice in commitment keeping. This includes weighing the methods that might be utilized to balance those demands and striving to cause the least injury to all parties while upholding the commitment of greatest priority to the individual. Ultimately, it is in the decision-making process, not the resolution, where integrity is exercised.

In conclusion, integrity and self-interest are irrevocably intertwined. Team members and leaders who stand out for their integrity are often those who strike a balance between altruism and self-interest. They understand the changing nature of circumstances and priorities in keeping commitments, and they recognize that there is no clear, one-size-fits-all answer to every ethical dilemma. What is clear is that it is as irresponsible as it is unethical to wholly sacrifice self-interest, either to the whims of societal expectations or other preconceived notions of what integrity should look like.

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