



INTEGRITY UNDER PRESSURE: THE TRUE TEST OF VALUES

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Integrity is a word we hear often. Across government and the private sector, organisations are increasingly expected to demonstrate not just what they stand for, but how they behave when the stakes are high.

For me, integrity is not defined by values displayed on websites, office walls, or in corporate presentations. It is revealed through actions, particularly when there is pressure, competing priorities, and something to lose. Throughout my career across Big 4, global, national, and local firms, I have seen people perform under both favourable conditions and significant pressure. It is often in those moments that true character emerges. Pressure has a way of revealing what people genuinely prioritise.

One experience early in my career still shapes my thinking today. A Partner I worked with identified a significant issue that needed to be reported. The client made it clear that if the matter was formally raised, the relationship would be damaged and the contract would likely be lost. Despite the commercial consequences, the issue was reported and the contract was not renewed.

Some may have viewed that outcome as a commercial failure. I saw it differently. I saw a professional choosing integrity over revenue. I saw leadership under pressure. Most importantly, I learned that values only have meaning when they are upheld in situations where compromise would be easier.

That experience reinforced a simple lesson: integrity is not measured when doing the right thing is easy; it is measured when there are consequences. Most organisations have a set of stated values. They often speak to integrity, accountability, respect, professionalism, and excellence. There is rarely anything wrong with the words themselves. The challenge is whether those values continue to guide decisions when circumstances become difficult.

Values become meaningful when they influence behaviour. This is especially true for leaders. People watch what leaders do far more closely than they listen to what leaders say. When leaders make ethical decisions under pressure, they demonstrate what the organisation's values look like in practice. Conversely, when values are compromised, trust can quickly erode.



This is not to suggest organisations are filled with people who lack integrity. Throughout my career, I have worked alongside many exceptional professionals and leaders whose courage and commitment to doing the right thing have left a lasting impression. However, culture can be fragile. It often takes only a small number of people acting contrary to an organisation's values to create doubt and undermine trust. The behaviour of a few can influence the experience of many.

At Sententia Consulting, I have met many professionals who have come from large global, national, and Big 4 firms. Many could have continued successful careers in those environments but were looking for something different: alignment. They wanted an organisation where values are demonstrated, not simply discussed; where commercial success and ethical conduct are not viewed as competing priorities.

What stands out to me most is the expectation our leaders set around ethical decision-making. The message is simple: regardless of the circumstances, we take the higher road. That expectation influences how we engage with clients, manage risk, challenge issues, and support our people when difficult decisions need to be made. In doing so, integrity becomes part of the firm's identity rather than a statement on a webpage.

As a Certified Internal Auditor and Chartered Accountant, integrity is not optional, it is a professional obligation. While ethics training is important, integrity cannot be developed through compliance requirements alone. It requires judgement, self-awareness, and sometimes courage. This is particularly true in internal audit. Findings that highlight risks or weaknesses are not always welcomed. There are occasions when conclusions are challenged and pressure is applied to soften findings. These are often the moments when integrity faces its most meaningful test.

When I genuinely believe a finding represents a significant risk, my responsibility is to remain objective, rely on the evidence, and exercise professional judgement. Respectful challenge is an important part of the audit process, but there are times when professional integrity requires standing firm.

The Real Measure of Integrity

Integrity is not defined by the values organisations publish, but by the decisions people make under pressure. For leaders, it is reflected in the example they set. For professionals, it is the commitment to do the right thing, even when challenged. Every organisation and individual will face moments where values are tested and doing the right thing comes at a cost. In those moments, integrity becomes a choice—and those choices ultimately shape culture, reputation, and trust.

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