



BY DENNIS SPARKS

Match Words With Deeds to Establish Trust

Consistency between word and deed is how people judge someone to be honest.

— James Kouzes & Barry Posner

INTEGRITY means being honest and doing what you say you'll do. Leaders' integrity sets the tone for the quality of all the relationships and trust within schools. That's why it's important that leaders understand the importance of their integrity and determine specific ways in which it might be strengthened.

Significant school improvement efforts rise and fall based on the quality of relationships within the school community, and trust is the glue that binds the school community into a cohesive whole. That cohesiveness is an important factor in determining whether schools will continuously improve teaching and learning for the benefit of all students. Leaders' integrity is a critical element in efforts to establish high levels of trust within school faculties. Leaders' honesty is an important aspect of their integrity, a subject addressed in my January 14, 2008, [column](#). So, too, is leaders' ability to match their words with their deeds, an alignment that is within their control and that can have a huge impact on the organizations they lead.

One way that teachers and others in the school community assess their leaders' integrity is the congruence between leaders' expressed values and their actions. Leaders

perceived to have a strong sense of integrity spend their time on the things they say are important, things such as building relationships and improving instruction. Members of the school community also notice whether leaders keep their promises—that is, if they do what they say they will do. Leaders with a strong sense of integrity have a management system that enables them to keep track of and follow through on the specific things that they agree to do in settings as diverse as faculty meetings and casual hallway conversations. In addition, keeping promises means that these leaders conduct meetings that begin and end at the appointed times. It also means that leaders show up on time at meetings and other events in which they participate and deliver work at the agreed upon time and at the level of quality expected.

The absence of any of these qualities may signal an integrity problem that is likely to reverberate throughout the school community, since others take their cue from the leader's behavior. And the higher the leader is placed within the organization, the farther the reverberation will be felt.

Fortunately, leaders' integrity is within their control. It is not dependent on the authority or actions of others, and its impact on the school community is significant. When leaders practice the discipline of consistently matching their words to their deeds, and when they encourage others to do the same through their example and teaching, they lead through learning.

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