

Why It's So Easy to Misrepresent Christ at Work

Like it or not, people are watching you. Is your character pointing them to Jesus?

We don't have to scan far into today's headlines to see that integrity is lacking in the marketplace. Scandals of fraud and mismanagement have rocked nearly every industry.

Our society seems to have a high degree of tolerance for those who have made mistakes in the ethics and integrity department. But in spite of our willingness to forgive and the stories of individuals who have seemed to demonstrate that crime does pay, most of the time shortcomings in the integrity department result in ruined careers and demolished lives.

As believers in business, how are we to think about integrity? Although we may never have been tempted to cook the books or commit insider trading, are there areas we still need to explore in the integrity-challenged world in which we operate today?

I say yes, definitely. Jesus' teachings provide us with examples of how believers are supposed to behave very differently from those who do not know God (see Matt. 5:1-48). These teachings have huge implications for us when it comes to work and other facets of our lives.

More than just not doing the wrong thing, to an even greater degree, integrity has to do with doing the right thing. In my experience, there are three areas in which women struggle the most: integrity in speech, integrity in image and what I will refer to as our M.O.—modus operandi—how we do what we do.

INTEGRITY IN SPEECH

There's plenty in the Bible to remind us that our speech has

an intensity of power and purpose (see James 3:5-10). The Proverbs 31 woman had evidently overcome in this area: "She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue" (v. 26, NIV). Several significant areas come to mind when we're talking about the tongue: gossip, inappropriate talk, response to insults and managing conflict.

Gossip. It is so easy to fall into the gossip trap. We sometimes even use prayer requests as an excuse to talk about the personal crisis in someone's life instead of just leaving it at, "Pray for Bill and Sally—God knows what they need."

At work, the most successful strategy to deal with gossip is to walk away. It doesn't do us much good to just keep our mouths shut but then sit there at the lunch table and listen to all the dirt being dished out.

Not participating in juicy gossip sessions builds trust between you and your co-workers. If Carol in sales has been thinking about sharing a personal problem with you because she knows you are a person of faith, she's much more likely to bring you into her confidence if she sees you back away from the gossip sessions by the soda machine.

Inappropriate talk. Here is where I struggle. I don't mean cussing like a sailor but rather letting my speech slip into clever jabs or funny insults that get a laugh but do little to build up a person or help the situation.

Personal jabs and jokes may be routine in your workplace, but that doesn't make these conversations right. My advice is to keep your speech pure, being careful not to appear self-righteous. You may avoid an employee relations situation that degenerates into a "he said/she said" battle or something even worse.

Response to insults. When we have been slighted, it is easy to jump into a defensive mode and launch into the offending person with a barrage of angry insults. A couple deep breaths

and a quickly muttered prayer can make the difference between an all-out conflict and a brief encounter that fades away.

When a conflict arises, we can calmly confront the offender with a fact-based, personal statement such as, "You know, Sue, that comment you made in yesterday's meeting really hurt my feelings. I want to have positive working relationships with all my colleagues, so I wanted you to know how I feel." Or we can walk away and leave it alone, knowing it's in God's hands and that His truth will prevail (see Deut. 32:35).

Managing conflict. How we handle conflict says volumes about what we believe. In addition to heartfelt prayer, you probably have some additional options, depending on your company. Asking your manager to help mediate and solve a problem with a co-worker can be a good route to repairing a relationship. Of course, if the manager is the problem, then you may have to take advantage of your company's mediation program or human resources teams who are available to help with conflict.

If you take the high road and initiate the resolution of a conflict that is distracting you from your work, you'll be seen as someone with high integrity and a commitment to the business. People who respond well in the face of conflict are valuable commodities to productivity-minded management teams.

In her Bible study *Believing God* (LifeWay) Beth Moore writes: "When Christ empowered His disciples to speak under His authority and produce certain results, He treated the tongue as an Holy Spirit infuses power through the we believe and speak, the Holy Spirit can use our tongues as instruments or vessels of supernatural power and can bring about stunning results" (see 2 Cor. 4:13).

If we speak the words we believe based on what we believe, we speak with power. As Christians, we can speak the presence of God into our marketplace.

Let's say we have tamed the temptation to gossip, and we've gotten our conflict-management skills honed to an art. In addition to these, our image also says volumes about what we believe, who we are and how we live out integrity in the workplace.

I'm not just talking about how we dress, although dressing for success has great merit. I am talking about how we present ourselves not just physically but also through our interactions in the workplace.

I'm all for using my femininity to endear myself to people. But I can't spout stuff that sounds like Scripture one day and wear a cleavage-revealing blouse and too short skirt the next. It is important to carefully consider our appearance and find ways to be stylish and still appropriate at the same time.

Perhaps we should totally ignore what people look like, but few of us do. For that reason, our image has impact on our integrity in the workplace. This extends beyond what we wear.

When we send out written communications full of typographical errors, we convey a carelessness that does not reflect the scriptural command to do all things excellently. In a world where second best will often do, we can truly set ourselves apart by portraying an image of professionalism and excellence.

My mother used to tell me to dress and act like those a step ahead of me on the career ladder. That's not a bad idea. Beyond dress, though, your integrity is also impacted by your M.O.: your modus operandi.

INTEGRITY IN YOUR M.O.

A Latin phrase, modus operandi is approximately translated as "mode of operation" and commonly used to describe someone's habits. Our habits at work, how we operate not just what we do, say a great deal about our integrity. Consider these aspects of your days in the marketplace, and you will see what

I mean:

- Do you always arrive rushing in or late for your shift or for meetings, or do you get there in time to relax and prepare for what lies ahead?
- Do you plan out your day the afternoon before so you are certain you're ready for any deadlines, conference calls or encounters you know you will have the following day?
- Do you complete projects on time and under budget to the best of your ability?
- How do you respond when you don't know the answer to a question? Do you make something up or say, "I need to get back to you," and then really follow up?
- Do you behave in a way that is consistent with your company's culture? (In some companies it is better to plow ahead and seek forgiveness later if necessary. In other workplaces, it is essential to ask permission before launching into something.)

These are just a few of the basic work habits that can convey your commitment to excellence in all things and therefore a level of integrity that is too often missing in the workplace today. These are ways you put feet on your faith and solidify your standing as a valuable employee.

I got a low mark once in the integrity department on a performance review. It had to do with grandstanding. "Grandstanding" means to act so as to impress. In the integrity category, this can convey that we are only out for ourselves.

I felt a need to make sure everyone knew how competent I was. Instead of letting my accomplishments speak for themselves, I had tooted my own horn a few too many times.

Yes, we have earthly roles and responsibilities, and we should do our work with excellence. But ultimately, we are presenting our work to the Lord and relying on His strength and timing (see 2 Tim. 2:14-16).

The last thing you want to do is talk yourself into a position or a set of responsibilities that you are not really qualified to handle. Grandstanding can lead to a huge lapse of integrity and career disaster as well.

Another aspect of your M.O. at work is the need to persevere. In the face of ongoing struggle, perseverance dramatically displays your integrity to a world that is quick to throw in the towel.

Indeed, a heavenly view of life and work helps us keep our ambition and therefore our integrity in check. We don't need to rush God's plan for our careers. He's had our lives mapped out from day one of eternity.

THE GOLDEN RULE

Probably one of the first things our mother taught you was: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (see Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31). Simple messages of great truth are easily forgotten in our frenetically busy society. We miss moments of grandeur in our lives and the lives of others because we're too busy. We have forgotten how to enjoy one another's company even at work.

Making the golden rule part of our *modus operandi* is the fastest way to demonstrate our integrity at work and in the workplace. It is also the primary way we demonstrate the love of God to others.

We sometimes equate kindness with weakness, or we assume that one can't be kind and be competitive or relentlessly focused on the business' goals at the same time. But we can treat others as we want to be treated and still make tough business decisions. We'll just do it more humanely.

It takes less effort to be kind and see the best in people and overlook small offenses. But there will always be a few people we have to walk away from or endure, recognizing that regardless of what we do, they will not respond in kind. It

should not be our mission to conform them to our level of interpersonal grace. Just walk away. And put that business card in the x-file.

Jesus' teaching is clear on this subject. Not only are we commanded to love as Jesus loved, but we are told that our commitment to treating others well will show the world whose we are (see John 13:34-35). Wouldn't it be great to love more of your marketplace sisters into the kingdom based on your example of love and kindness?

It's not easy to do the right thing in a world that so often accepts what is not right. However, a commitment to integrity in speech, image and how we do our work will demonstrate our faith to our co-workers more fully than a thousand tracts or bumper stickers.

It will also allow us to approach our work and our careers with the confidence that we are seeking God's path and His timing for what we do and how we do it in the marketplace. When we don't rush Him and let Him give us the wisdom and strength to live out our callings, our faith doesn't falter in the workplace. In fact the opposite is true—it grows and intensifies, just like the integrity that He cultivates in our hearts.

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