



Facet: Integrity

Can You Have Too Much Integrity?

By Michael Seitchik

Sep 22, 2015

I recently read an article about problems with the Google driverless cars. These cars always follow the rules they are given and are programmed to expect humans to follow the same rules to the letter of the law.

For example, when a Google driverless car came to an intersection with a four-way stop sign, it would not proceed until every other car had come to a complete stop (which is what we are supposed to do according to the law). But, the vast majority of people never come to **a complete stop. We slow down, but we don't stop. As a result**, the Google car could not cross the street (unless a human inside the car overrode the computer system).

That is, the car was programmed to have perfect integrity in terms of following the law. But **this caused problems in a world where not everyone follows the rules to a 'T'.**

If you think about it, we often get upset with people who we feel are too "rule bound". Were you ever "stuck" behind a human driver who drove exactly at the speed limit, making it impossible to pass them? I've done my share of cursing out loud in my car at "stupid" drivers who had the audacity of going at the speed limit.

Why are those stupid drivers so rigid (and probably very self-righteous too)?! Why don't they just move over? Don't they realize there is a half of a mile of cars piled up behind them wanting to go faster?!

So, while the programmers of the driverless car and the driver of the car going at the speed limit felt they were doing the right thing by adhering to the rules we are all supposed to obey, we can perceive these people are being too inflexible, too rigid—even self-righteous.

The problems Google is having with their cars reminded me of some recent coaching sessions I have had with executives who had received extremely high ratings on the Integrity facet of the [Bates ExPI, the first-ever scientific assessment of executive presence and](#)



[influence](#). These executives often also received negative comments about their rigidity. In addition, many had relatively low scores on Restraint and/or Composure—facets that reflect the degree to which a leader is deliberate, reasonable, thoughtful, and calm.

For example, one executive had very high standards about fairness, and he backed up these **standards by fighting every instance of perceived unfairness (his team was “unfairly” criticized, or didn’t get the credit they deserved, etc.)**. That is, the executive was easily **“triggered” (lost his composure) by any actions he thought was unfair**.

While others applauded this executive’s Integrity, they disliked the executive’s rigid insistence on defending his team against every possible “unfair” criticism. In fact, the executive was perceived as favoring his team too much (which, paradoxically, could be perceived as “unfair” by others).

Just like the Google car that is programmed to follow the rules to the letter, or the driver that has the integrity to drive at the speed limit, sometimes having this much integrity can have unintended consequences. By having so much integrity about defending his team, the executive was seen as not being a team player by his peers.

Obviously, a high level of integrity is a critical ingredient in executive presence and being an **influential leader. When it’s not overused, it’s important to building trust.**

But, while the Google car had the integrity to not move until everyone else had stopped, by doing so it was not serving one of its main purposes – to provide transportation and get someone from point A to point B.

As an executive (as opposed to a Google car), you have the discretion to choose between maintaining the integrity of your mission (provide transportation) and keeping your commitment to the exact rules of the road. At some point, we all compromise some aspect of our integrity in one area to maintain it in another.

Yes, you pay a price for compromising your integrity. But you also pay a price for *never* compromising.

Just be aware of the trade-offs and take responsibility for the consequences. That takes integrity.

Ei World is a long-established provider of cutting-edge
Emotional Intelligence initiatives.

We help world-class organisations build competitive advantage,
through focused and timely investment in key individuals and
teams.

Established 1999. Global provider, experienced in providing
coaching and development interventions across 37 countries.

