**Powerplay: The three clocks and five observations on how to build integrity**

Lars Johannsen

Department of Political Science, Aarhus BSS, Aarhus University

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**Integrity** is a personal moral compass guiding every decision, every time. We know that corruption and bribery is immoral. Every faith I have encountered teaches this. In Dante’s Divine Comedy, we meet the corrupt in the 8th circle. Those that change a No into a Yes for cash. Soiled forever there is no redemption. Integrity cannot be divided. Yet, Dante himself had to flee into exile. Accused and sentenced in absentia for embezzlement, taking illicit commission in exchange for licenses and selling offices. What you practice is not always, what you teach.

Moving along, I have examined values of public officials. In one survey, more than 90 percent of the public officials in the Baltic States, for example, instantly recognizes the arm’s length principle. Yet, corruption is commonplace.

This **discrepancy** between values and actual behavior place us in a dilemma where we try to rationalize or excuse ourselves. I have delved into these and found that common justifications used among bribers from the private sector are that “the management told me”, “everybody else (read competitors) are doing it” or that “I did it for the benefit of the company”.

This opening remark also illustrates that building integrity must be seen in relation to the group, the company, and competitors and society. Furthermore, integrity is something we have - or not - together. The whole integrity of a building is damaged if one of the pillars a smoldering away. Thus, **integrity is also a culture** and cultural change is difficult as it encompasses changing attitudes, beliefs and values.

I will illuminate this difficulty with the image of **three clocks**:

**First**, it may take six months (or a year) to develop a plan. A multifaceted plan. Have this plan passed through parliament and endowed with sufficient resources. This requires political will.
Second, it may take 6 to 10 year to set the institutions, staff them and have them to work in the fullest sense. This may be independent anti-corruption institutions or networks between multiple existing agencies with renewed focus. It may be whistleblower legislations, institutions or it may be organizations charged with the task of raising awareness. It is, however, important to recognize that it is a concerted effort involving multiple agents and multiple policies.

Third, it may take 60 to 90 years – two or three generations – before the change has taken place, and become fully ingrained in the sense that it is habitual. It is no longer something you must choose to do: You run on autopilot.

The point is stamina. To get there you must establish what is equivalent of ‘powerplay’ in icehockey. Throughout the two-three generations, there must be constant pressure on all sides. Constant improvement. The ‘Island of excellence’ strategy may be useful for demonstration purposes: I may be useful when you seek to upgrade general or specific capacities within the public sector but not when it comes to cultural change. A pristine apple in a rotten basket will rot itself.

So how can we nudge the development of integrity? What will work and under which circumstances will it work? What will be effective and what can we recommend? Why not ask the questions to the civil servants? We did this in the Baltic states. More than 1.700 civil servants in a context of moderate to severe corruption.

First, they both recommend and believe that increased punishment for breaches is effective. Raising the bar. This may indeed be effective in reducing the number of breaches but not necessarily the sums involved as offenders may demand higher risk-premiums. Yet, if it is a cultural change that is the aim, then a decline in the number of active participants is what is called for. We often speak of tipping-point: The point where it become rational even for the uncorrupted to become corrupt – everyone else is doing it.

Second, they think increased efforts to detect wrongdoing is effective. However, the civil servants are also weary. When will extraordinary investigation rights be an invasion of privacy? Do we dare risk democracy and habeas corpus in the attempt to save democracy from the scourge of corruption?

Third, they all recommended courses in ethics but also believe such courses are – well – less effective. Courses in ethics may highlight the issue, raise awareness but change less on the ground. I hypothesize that this is more so in corrupt environments than in less corrupted environments. In a survey of managers from the private sector – comparing Estonian and Danish managers – we found that Danish managers were much more confident in the role of courses than their Estonian colleagues were.

Fourth, the civil servants and privates managers we have studied all point to the importance of administrative reform. It may sound INTANGIBLE and transparency is certainly part of it, but on closer scrutiny – (matching perceptions of corruption within their organization with administrative procedures and processes) – it turns out that appointment and promotion by merit is a game changer.
The principle of meritocracy touches on professionalism, courses of training and special examinations as well as developing public duty. When meritocracy controls corruption is through the civil servants’ intrinsic values of impartiality and equal treatment. It increases the moral costs of being corrupt. Moreover, appointment and promotion through meritocratic procedures protects the public employee from the political chain of command – and undue political pressure.

Naturally, I believe that universities and colleges have an important role in educating and providing the best-qualified candidates for the public sector. This, in turn, requires that universities and colleges constantly overhaul courses, curricula and university pedagogy to be part of the solution. A primary mission of universities is research but less not forget that teaching is equal.

Finally, there is a demonstrable effect of management and leadership both in the public and the private sector. It is not only about setting the example. It is about management being instrumental in leading the cultural change, in setting rules and providing backup and support for employees that, for example, blow the whistle if observing wrongdoing.

But of course, you may think. Managers should show leadership. They should encourage whistleblowing – to correct wrongdoing.

This is not necessarily so. My research show that would-be whistleblowers often refrain from blowing the whistle because they are afraid of sanctions from their superior or the more informal sanctions – coldshouldering or worse – they face from their colleagues.

The manager confronts a dilemma in that exposing wrongdoing may draw unwanted attention to the organization. The colleagues close ranks. And it is even worse if the whistleblower takes the report outside the organization: It feels as a breach of loyalty to the agency, department, the group. We know the stakes from daily language “tell-tale tit: you should have your tongue slit”, “fouling one’s own nest”, “washing dirty linen in public”, “piper”, “snitch” or “squealer”.

Anonymous whistleblower arrangements may alleviate the situation but anonymous arrangements comes with drawbacks nor are they sufficient in place of management training. Again, we can foresee a role for universities and colleges in management training but equally important is that our research show that managers must be stakeholders – or more correctly – have something at stake. Incentives matter. In a survey of more than 1.000 private managers, we found that managers invest more in eradicating corruption if their own career is at stake. Thus including integrity breach as a clause in all contracts should be a minimum.

To conclude. Building integrity is not only a time-consuming and lengthy process but also a multifaceted and inclusive task that calls for numerous actors to be involved. This are naturally various public agencies, but also representatives from the private sector, universities and civil society. To stay in the analogy of powerplay in ice hockey: You secure dominance through a majority and multitude of players – some good a passing – others at shooting.
References


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