



# CAMERON-BROOKS, INC.

## Professional Recruiters

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### Roger's Tip of the Month

#### “Professional Integrity”

With the recent corporate scandals, there has been a lot of discussion on the importance of professional integrity. In my almost 40 years in this business, integrity is the single most important factor that determines a leader's upward mobility in an organization. A lack of integrity can undermine almost any degree of talent, work ethic, and track record. Put simply, no person can grow beyond the limitations of his or her own integrity. People will forgive a lot of things, especially if you are growing as a leader. They won't, however, trust someone who has slips in character. Even a few occasional mistakes in this area are lethal to a high potential career.

One of the reasons that I have always been proud of my association with the military is because it teaches the relationship between integrity, character and effective leadership. In the military, you learn that it is a leader's job to not only know the difference between right and wrong, but also to have the will and discipline to act on this knowledge regardless of the consequences or personal cost. This is the heart of integrity. While this is taught in the military, I have been concerned, however, with what I believe might be a growing casualness when it comes to integrity and decision making. I have seen this in examples involving alumni and transitioning military officers. I thought it was important enough to write about it this month.

Here are some principles that I believe are key parts of business ethics and standards of behavior that are critical to effective leadership.

**1. When it comes to integrity, military trained officers should be held to a higher standard.** You have been taught leadership from the first day you put on the uniform, and you set an example for others to follow, whether you are still serving or have transitioned to another career. You know that of all the virtues that make great leaders, integrity is the one that comes before all others. The rest of your leadership capability matters little if you have problems either discerning or acting on what is right and wrong. I hear too many prior military officers make excuses that the rules in the business world are different than those in the military (i.e., “other people in business do it, so I should, too”). No matter what your walk of life, where you were raised, or what your beliefs are, nobody wants to be led by a person who even has occasional problems in this area. Leadership is leadership, regardless of your organization.

**2. Integrity goes beyond honesty.** Honesty means that you tell the truth and that you take steps to ensure that your words reflect or conform to the reality around you. While speaking truthfully is a big part of integrity, it is only the beginning. Integrity means that we take steps to ensure that our ACTIONS conform to our values. It is the action part where I see variability these days. It is one thing to know right versus wrong, but it is another matter completely to act on it. For instance, I talked recently with a former military officer who, after accepting a job and starting work, was approached by another company to interview for an opportunity. He subsequently received and accepted an offer from this second company. When I asked him if he considered the integrity issues around interviewing with another company after he already accepted an offer, he said, “Roger, the situation just presented itself. I did not go after this opportunity. It just happened.” Well, I am sorry, but leaders don't let circumstances drive their values, but rather use their values to control their environment. Principles of integrity (and professionalism) should have directed this former military officer to tell the second company that he gave his word to his current company and that he will not go back on that commitment. Regardless of the new opportunity, is it really worth compromising your integrity?

Keep your promises, fulfill expectations, and ensure you integrate your values into your decision making. After all, the word integrity is derived from “integrating” your values into your actions.

**3. Integrity means you communicate openly.** Leaders are diligent about telling the entire truth. Telling half-truths or withholding information with the intent of protecting yourself puts you into the integrity “gray” areas. Anytime you withhold information, you are in essence deceiving another person. As an example, I was talking last month with a Vice President at a client company. The VP told me that one of his former military officers resigned with no prior discussion of career issues, concerns, etc., after approximately a year on the job. Even worse, he just had his performance review prior to resigning and did not mention any concerns or the fact that he was looking at other career options. This is telling half-truths and in this case, ended up burning a bridge for this person with his former company. Integrity means having the courage and character to communicate openly even if it means some personal risk. This former JMO should have approached his boss either before or certainly during the performance review and let him know that he had some concerns with his career at this company. He would have probably found a very receptive audience and at least would have impressed his boss with his courage and candor. Even if he did end up leaving his first employer, he would have done it with his integrity intact. This is what leaders do.

**4. Treating everyone by the same principles is a big part of integrity.** Nothing violates personal integrity more than people who talk behind another person’s back. While many people will take the path of least resistance by criticizing and participating in gossip about others who are not present, what they don’t realize is this type of duplicity and double-talk weakens relationships and breeds a lack of trust. Leaders know that people will only really trust you when you maintain consistency in your integrity and demonstrate a high personal regard for all with whom you work. When someone is belittling or complaining about another person, be loyal to those who are not there to defend themselves. In doing so, you will build the trust of the people who are present (although they may not at first appreciate the honest confrontation generated by this type of integrity). When you treat everyone the same, people will come to trust you. It takes considerable courage and inner strength, but in the long run, you will gain respect by taking the high road on this issue. Remember, there is a big difference between lasting leadership and popularity.

**5. Don’t subscribe to the “look out for #1” principle.** The media has popularized the notion that successful leaders achieve their success by taking care of themselves and relentlessly working a “personal agenda.” I can assure you that this “winning at all cost” leadership style does not work for lasting leaders. This is not to say that you won’t see plenty of examples of people who have this attitude, but my point is to discourage you from following their examples. Whether in the business world or the military, people follow those leaders whom they can trust to do the right thing and make sound decisions in difficult situations. It’s hard to trust the motives of a person who might at a moment’s notice toss aside the organization and march off in another direction. The great leaders put what is best for their organizations ahead of their personal agendas.

What values are so important to you that you will stand your ground on them regardless of the consequences? Take time to write out these values and keep them close to you. There will be times during a professional career that doing what is right will be very hard, especially when you know that the “high road” will come at a personal cost. These integrity tests are a natural part of growing as a leader. Whether you are still in the military or have transitioned to another career, remember what you learned as an officer ñ integrity is forged one decision at a time, one day at a time, and one relationship at a time.