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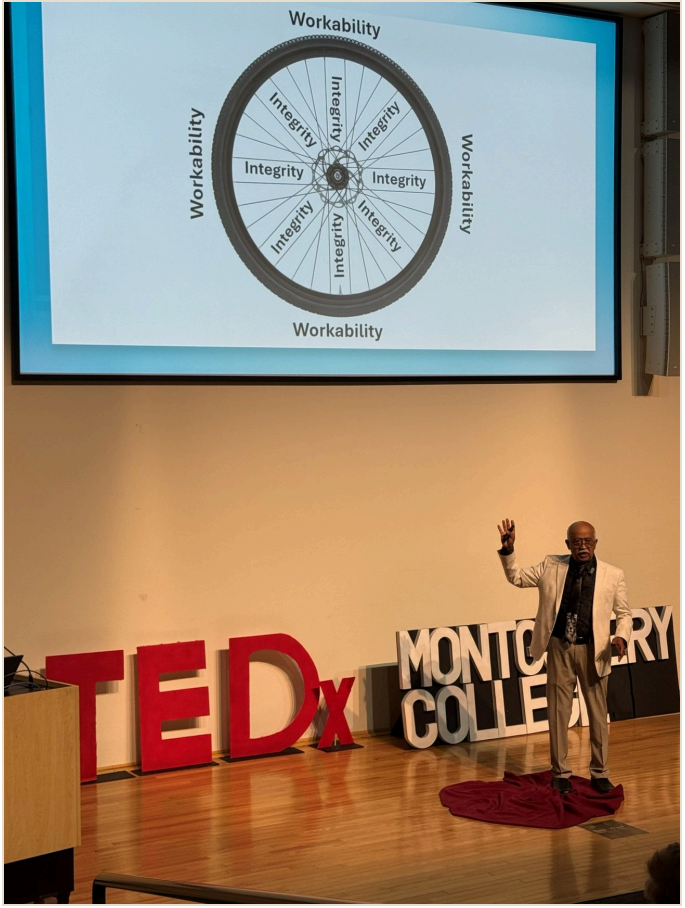
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TEDX PRACTICE SCRIPT · TEDXMONTGOMERYCOLLEGE

Maybe Integrity Isn't What You Think

Integrity as workability rather than virtue — the bicycle wheel, the Three Musketeer policy, and a clinic that stayed open.

By **Ravi R. Iyer, MD**



From the talk at TEDxMontgomeryCollege. Retained as part of the record of how the talk was presented.

> **WHAT THIS ENTRY IS**
> The speaker biography on the event page states that the author was born with Asperger's-ADHD. The formal diagnosis came at 58, as the TIME profile entered in this Record as **AR-2026-11-013** sets out. The two statements do not contradict each other: the condition is lifelong and the diagnosis is dated. Both are recorded here because both were published.

Please raise your hand if.... you ever made a promise to be on time for a meeting and were late? How many have ever made a promise and broken your word?

So go ahead, tell me what was the first thing you did when you were late? Did you give a reason? Did you feel bad about it? Sorry maybe?

Why do we do this? We've been taught that integrity is a moral virtue. AND WE ABSOLUTELY abhor being thought of as a person without moral virtue!

"For most of us integrity means being a good person. It means honesty, righteousness, virtue.

But what if integrity has nothing to do with being good or looking good... and everything to do with whether things are workable?"

I know this is a hot button topic since everyone relates so personally to it.... But I invite everyone to step away from their personal view for the next 17 minutes and consider an alternative view of what this could mean at an organizational level..... as a possibility.... Like an experiment....

What if we redefined Integrity as all about workability? About being operationally whole and complete in a way that allows for everything you are engaged with to work exactly the way you intended it to.

Research published by Erhard-Jensen & Zaffron in a series of Harvard Business School NOM papers reframed integrity not as morality— but as an essential and non-negotiable factor of organizational performance.

They redefined.... Integrity as workability.... as being whole and complete and functioning as designed and intended

And they explained it with the analogy of a bicycle wheel.

A bicycle wheel has integrity when all its spokes are intact.

> Remove one spoke — it still works.
> Remove ten — it wobbles.
> Remove enough — it collapses.
> The wheel is not immoral.
> It's simply unworkable.
> It's like gravity.
> It's not good or bad.
> It just is.
> And when integrity is compromised, performance degrades.

The Harvard papers reframed organizational performance and success as the effective execution of promises. They found that high performing organizations are groups of people living and being and executing faithfully upon their promises as their word exactly as declared and within the time frame, they promised.... and that the commonly held view of integrity as a moral virtue creates a unique problem....

When we treat integrity as morality, we become afraid of it.

> Because morality carries judgment.
> Good.
> Bad.
> Right.
> Wrong.

If integrity means "I am a good person," then breaking my word can be interpreted as "I am a bad person."

So, people avoid giving their word. They hesitate to commit.

They protect their image instead of their word.

OR.... They give their word conditionally. They make lawyer-like promises. If the sun is at this angle and the moon is there and there's a comet on the horizon, I'll do this for you!

They justify.

> *I was late because of traffic.*

> *I missed the deadline because things got busy.*

> *I didn't call because I was overwhelmed.*

People conduct their lives as if being late because we were caught behind a school bus is somehow morally better than if we were late simply because we did not care to be on time. But operationally, the reason does not matter.

> The impact on the business is the same.
> When a plane is late, the passengers miss connections.
> When a leader breaks a promise, trust erodes.
> When a system fails, cascading failures follow.

A car without structural integrity will break down in traffic. Creating a rippling cascade of broken commitments for its occupants and all the people and businesses that depended upon them. What is true for a physical vehicle is equally true for the word that is given between people.

It isn't about blame. .... It's about workability.

I run a busy medical clinic and like all healthcare organizations I deal with the highest stakes: people's health, life-and-death decisions, fear, scarcity, pressure. I first came across the Harvard research papers on integrity when I became a Hospice Director and Chairman at the local hospital and I saw how staff, doctors and executives behaved regarding their commitments and their word.

What I saw showed me that in an organization every expansion in members and complexity requires a higher order of integrity for the system to continue being workable.

> A two-person startup can survive on informal promises.
> Add five employees — now alignment matters.
> Add multiple locations — now breakdowns multiply.
> Move into multiple cities — exponential complexity.

Scaling complexity without scaling integrity is like adding weight to a wheel while removing spokes.

Eventually it collapses.... Because the system lost integrity. The broken commitments eroded workability.

So, I decided to put it to the test in my clinic but within a contextual framework we called the Three Musketeer Policy.

I sat with my staff, and we decided to see what would happen if we began to treat integrity as operational workability — rather than a moral imperative

We made one simple rule:

I am my word.

And if I break my word, ... I SIMPLY ACKNOWLEDGE IT.... I say:

> *I broke my word.*

> No excuses.
> No stories.
> No traffic.

Then .... ASSESS THE IMPACT.... I ask:

> *What was the impact?*

> *How do I clean it up?*

> "And then .... I RESTORE INTEGRITY.... I recommit to my word.
> That's it.
> No shame.

> No guilt.
> Simply Acknowledge, Assess, Restore

At first this felt very weird. Contrast what we were trying to do with what normally goes on between people.

“I’m really sorry. No kidding, I really feel bad about not showing up on time, but I want you to know the traffic was terrible, and it was murder getting the kids ready and off to school, and they kids knocked over the flower vase— and the water went all over the carpet and I had to clean that up, and it’s just been a terrible morning…”

Now what was it that we had planned to do together?

How many of you want to hear some more promises from me after that?

I didn’t think so.

But if I can say to you:

“Look, I promised to be here at 9 o’clock. It’s 9:30. I’m late. If there was some cost or consequence to my being late, is there some way I can clean up the impact?

What would be the effect if this happened?…… Well, let me tell you…. When we did this something extraordinary happened.

People became freer to give their word.

Because integrity was no longer about being good or looking good.

It was about keeping the system whole.

We didn’t become better people— we became more reliable. And that reliability created the real good that everyone wanted to be a part of.

> We discovered something else.
> Integrity creates authenticity.

When someone consistently keeps and restores their word, they appear authentic.

It is how the world sees an individual or a team that acts consistently with integrity.

And the contextual principle that served as a container for our Integrity was the “Three Musketeers” policy we adopted: All for one. One for all….

And this context formed the purpose that made our integrity serve a moral good. It became THE SCAFFOLDING UPON WHICH WE WERE ABLE TO SCALE OUR INTEGRITY.

We implemented this system in our clinic in 2012.

Eight years later it proved its value in 2020 during the pandemic, when this system was stress-tested.

COVID-19 was a once-in-a-generation event that left no one unscarred and while I’m going to describe what we did, that allowed us to keep an entire community safe, I’m acutely sensitive to the fact that many, many people were not as fortunate as we were.

During the COVID-19 pandemic 85-90% of practices in Northern Virginia closed their doors while we remained functional and together through the worst healthcare crisis in a century. We used the All for One-One for All principle of the 3-Musketeer policy as the CONTEXTUAL CONTAINER for

our created WORD.... I AM MY BROTHER's KEEPER..... AND we innovated and improvised from this position.

I AM MY BROTHER'S KEEPER: We decided to keep both well and ill patients safe so we separated them. Well patients were seen inside the office. Sick patients were seen in the parking lot in their cars. Plastic sheets draped over car windows converted cars into mobile patient isolation chambers, while battery operated fans clipped to vehicle side mirrors directed infective airflow away from us allowing us to examine and treat people in their vehicles without exposing others or ourselves.

I AM MY BROTHER'S KEEPER: We needed to keep ourselves and each other safe. We instituted a two-person work team operating in a buddy system and each would watch out for the other person's safety, as we treated the patient in the car, monitoring each other for any unconscious break in our exposure, contact, or infection control protocol. Any lapse was immediately handled with a spray of disinfectant on us by our partner.

I AM MY BROTHERS KEEPER: Many patients were too sick to come to the clinic but not sick enough to be hospitalized.... So we created COVID HOUSE CALLS with a twist.... Camping Shower tents became mobile changing rooms that we could take with us on COVID house calls to residential areas. We would set it up in the driveway and change in and out of our gear as we entered and exited houses in the community. This innovation allowed us to take our services and infection control capabilities into environments over which we did not have complete control.

Looking back it seems simple but these and many more pivots and innovations emerged out of our declarative word "I am My Brother's Keeper". Our ability to keep that word, clean up when we broke it, restore it and continue our purpose .... allowed us to keep a community of 100,000 individuals safe.

From March 2020 through July 2022, we performed over 100,000 COVID tests and treated over 10,000 COVID positive patients without any one of us contracting the disease as shown by tests that we constantly conducted to detect both clinical and asymptomatic disease in us. We became an oasis of safety in a healthcare desert. Our clinic saw 5 times as many patients per doctor per day, our professional reputations skyrocketed and our sense of personal satisfaction was incalculable.

We survived and thrived during incredible devastation and suffering because integrity scaled. And it is because we survived amid such devastation that I stand before you today and share this idea that saved us all.

When each person is committed to something greater than self, AND ACTS WITH INTEGRITY TO THAT PURPOSE the system strengthens beyond measure .... that produces the ultimate moral good.

We found that when you treat integrity as a condition for performance, ... it becomes an essential criterion for success

> Breaking your word is costly for performance.
> It reduces power.... degrades performance
> It reduces trust.... erodes teams

It reduces velocity.... Adds a hidden friction into everyday work

It reduces scale. And ultimately breaks the system.

And we began to protect our word the way engineers protect load-bearing beams.

Before we did this, we had blame and shame, turf protection, excuses, hesitation, conditional promises

After we implemented this system we got ownership, resilience, clarity of purpose and speed of execution.

> So, here's the invitation to consider as a possibility....
> "Maybe Integrity isn't about being good as much as it is

about being your word, acknowledging it when it breaks, assessing and cleaning the impact and restoring it so that life works....

So maybe we can Stop using integrity as a badge of virtue. And start using it as a structural requirement for workable performance.

The next time you break your word— don't explain it. Acknowledge it— Clean up the Impact & Restore it.

> and see if excellence emerges as a byproduct.
> Thank you.

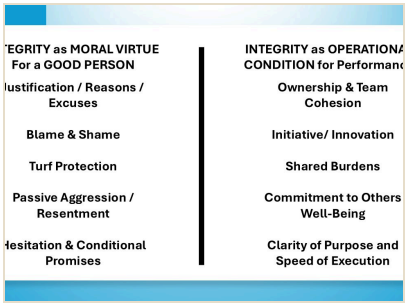
> END OF TALK

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SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY, AS PUBLISHED BY THE EVENT

Ravi Ramamoorthy Iyer · Doctor & Physician Scientist

Dr. Ravi Ramamoorthy Iyer, trained in India and at Harvard as a physician-scientist, has spent over four decades at the intersection of science, medicine, and innovation. His work spans biochemistry, molecular biology, and pharmaceutical development, alongside leadership roles as a hospital department chair and hospice director. Recognized by Marquis Who's Who and Top Doctors of America, he is the author of 10 books on leadership, healthcare, and human potential, and the creator of patented FDA-registered remedies. Born with Asperger's-ADHD, Dr. Iyer transformed his neurodiverse journey into "Neuroalignment," a powerful framework for resilient leadership. He is the founder of the Iyer Clinic, Chairman of ActivPower Inc., CEO of IR-FocalPoint, and host of the "Stuck to Strong" podcast, where he explores the potential within us all.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ravi R. Iyer, MD is a physician-scientist, entrepreneur, author and five-time TEDx speaker who has spent four decades exploring a deceptively simple question: what makes human beings, and the organizations they create, perform at their best? A Harvard-trained physician, corporate strategist and the founder of multiple healthcare and performance ventures, he is the creator of Neuroalignment, a framework for building high-performance organizations around the realities of human cognitive diversity. His work sits at the intersection of biology, leadership, technology and human behavior.

THE AKAASHIK RECORD

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