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HONEST EXECUTIVE



BY J. KEVIN MCHUGH

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TABLE *of* CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3

PART 1: THE TIME-VALUE EQUATION..... 5

 Overview5

 Can you afford not to invest in your continued self-development?5

 Leadership Development Programs7

 Executive Coaching7

 Psychotherapy8

 Relationship Counseling.....8

 Religious and Spiritual Practices9

 Putting It Into Practice 13

 Questions to Ponder 13

 Actions to Take 13

PART 2: INTENTIONAL TRUTH TELLING.....14

 What’s the depth of your commitment to leading with meaningful
 communication as a cornerstone of your leadership? 14

 Awakening the desire for and/or deepening the commitment to careful
 and meaningful communication19

 Confronting discomfort with self-disclosure, openness and the vulnerability
 that comes with it20

Putting It Into Practice22

 Questions to Ponder22

 Actions to Take22

PART 3: THE GIFT OF HIGHER POWER.....23

 What is my worldview, and how does it impact my effectiveness as a leader?23

 Putting It Into Practice26

 Questions to Ponder26

 Actions to Take26

PART 4: HUMILITY AND THE HONEST EXECUTIVE.....27

 Can you build your capacity to care so that you serve others before yourself? ...27

 Putting It Into Practice33

 Questions to Ponder33

 Actions to Take33

FINAL THOUGHTS.....34

ABOUT KEVIN MCHUGH35

INTRODUCTION

If I were to grade the state of interpersonal honesty in business today, I'd give it a C-. Executives don't take the time to fully examine the truth that runs beneath the surface of their most important business relationships, haven't learned the skills they need to speak honestly and in a way that keeps difficult conversations from derailing, lack commitment to increasing their self-awareness and confronting their discomfort with self-disclosure, and have failed to fully examine the way their worldview impacts their leadership influence.

Even when they do find it in themselves to be honest, they often do so at the wrong time, and in the wrong way, setting off the "fight or flight" fireworks that cause others to defend themselves or their teams.

"The Honest Executive" is for CEOs and senior executives who are looking to master honesty within themselves and in their relationships with colleagues, staff and customers. This is not a book about honesty as it relates to business ethics or an MBA course on communications.



It is a book about the power of truthfulness, the aptitude and skills it takes to execute it effectively, and the benefits of living more honestly by finding and embracing the deeper purpose of one's life.

This book explores the undeniable truth that leaders who both have a strong sense of an overarching purpose greater than themselves and practice the virtue of humility are significantly more effective in all their relationships.

"The Honest Executive" is a field manual – full of stories told in an intimate manner – about the struggles of admitting character flaws, the courage to confront and address them, and the successes that come from valuing honesty over hidden agendas.

Offering a rich inventory of tools, techniques and exercises, the book is organized into four parts that address the biggest breakdowns that occur in executive interpersonal honesty today:

1. Underestimating the time and emotional investment it takes to expand self-awareness and develop more honest relationships.
2. Failing to rigorously apply the skills that are conceptually known to be necessary for honest communications.
3. Misunderstanding the intimate connection between honesty with others and honesty with one's self, including having a clear sense of life's purpose and meaning.
4. Embracing a more humble approach to leadership – one that requires a level of openness and appropriate vulnerability – by facing one's fear of losing power and/or respect and then ultimately coming to a point where you joyfully place the interests of others ahead of your own.

PART 1:

THE TIME-VALUE EQUATION

Overview

Can you afford not to invest in your continued self-development?


I intentionally framed this question as “self-development” rather than “leadership development,” because focusing on the self is foundational to developing as a leader. Self-development is what lays the groundwork for all other kinds of development efforts, and it is distinct from building professional knowledge and industry expert competencies.

Today’s senior executive is pulled in a thousand different directions and often scheduled down to the minute. It’s commonplace for leaders to be completely consumed with meetings, travel, giving presentations, planning strategies and responding to the latest crises. In an environment overwhelmed by action without sufficient time for reflection, the



ongoing development of interpersonal skills necessary for effective leadership often just doesn't happen. Or worse, executives will continually and unconsciously have interactions with others that convey a sense of being so busy that they appear unapproachable. They've lost the awareness that every human interaction can either build or sabotage trust and open connection.

But the more leaders work on their self-awareness, the more they learn to be honest about their own strengths, weaknesses and feelings, the more present they can become to those around them. The pursuit of self-awareness enables them to see and speak about things in a powerful way, nurtures the people around them, enhances the success of the business and enriches personal satisfaction for themselves and others.



It is worthwhile to truthfully examine your time investment in this important area of your leadership development.

How much time do you commit – annually, quarterly, monthly, even weekly – to developing self-understanding and becoming aware of your impact on others around you? It is worthwhile to truthfully examine your time investment in this important area of your leadership development.

I often begin my work with clients by asking them to give me an inventory of the kinds of things they are doing that might be categorized as self-development. About 25 percent initially respond with, "I'm not doing anything at the moment," and almost everyone says, "I am learning on the job every day."

Beyond daily growth opportunities, executives engage in a number of common types of self-development, both in their personal lives and in a professional context, including:

Leadership Development Programs

Almost all Fortune 1000 companies offer in-house leadership development programs that afford their executives the opportunity to, among other things, do some very specific work on leadership strengths and weaknesses.

Using a variety of assessment tools and methods, the executive is able to both self-assess and then get feedback from others on his or her leadership approach and working style. In its most simple form, a company encourages (or requires) its executives to attend seminars or trainings.

The challenge of these leadership development programs is that they tend to focus on improving competencies using various communication models. They often, however, do little to emphasize the advantage of disclosure, openness and sharing appropriate vulnerabilities as key ways to build trust.

Executive Coaching

This has become one of the most popular methods for leadership growth and development over the past ten years. Key reasons to engage a coach may include: assisting an otherwise talented executive who is not reaching his full potential, creating an intervention when conflict between two key players arises, providing the CEO with his or her own personal sounding board, or helping a leader accelerate his self-awareness in a shorter period of time than would otherwise be possible with traditional therapy.

Coaching can also come in the form of CEO groups in which executives have access to mentoring and feedback from their peers. While most coaching offers opportunities


for self-awareness, some executives can end up becoming over-reliant on a coach and avoiding taking full responsibility for making decisions.

Psychotherapy

Some leaders seek self-awareness by spending time with a psychologist, psychiatrist or other credentialed practitioner to examine the underlying emotional wounds affecting their personal happiness, self-image and key interpersonal relationships. While many find the time spent in this type of work enlightening, breakdowns – such as the counselor not being a good fit; wanting faster progress; thinking, “This isn’t working” and giving up too soon – can keep counseling sessions from bearing the fruit of self-awareness.

Relationship Counseling

Maintaining and growing a long-term, committed relationship, for example, a marriage, is hard work that requires deep personal reflection and emotional investment. If you really want your marriage to work, you have to be willing to look in the mirror. In fact, CEOs who've actually worked on their marriages are, generally speaking, further ahead in terms of self-awareness.



If you really want your marriage to work, you have to be willing to look in the mirror.

Bear in mind, however, that some leaders face such a degree of emotional complexity in their marital connection that self-awareness is clouded by the conflicts they encounter. In addition, if counseling is not successful, the executive may have to carry a range of hidden emotions, which negatively affects his or her ability to focus and

engage at work. Ironically, this can also lead to spending even more time at the office, as an escape, which may have been a source of the marital discord in the first place.

Religious and Spiritual Practices

Many executives who have been raised within a traditional religious environment continue to practice their faith in some form or another and have retained the values inherent in their faith as they reflect on its teachings about life. For others, yoga, meditation or other nonreligious spiritual practices may provide a measure of self-awareness and a broader sense of a higher power. The breakdown occurs when executives fail to walk their spiritual talk and the tenets of their faith or practice don't match their behavior at work.

Regardless of which path(s) to self-awareness an executive pursues, at the end of the day, the goal is to be effective in the world of business. You desire for things to happen a certain way, and, like most executives, you drive toward your destination with a strong intention.

But what happens when you get pushback? Or conflict and disagreement arise? What about when an important person stands in the way of your intentions being realized? How do you react when what you want isn't happening because someone is either in the way or has a viewpoint that differs from yours?


As it turns out, all these paths toward self-development, while useful and often powerful, pale in comparison to this simple truth: The best opportunity for self-awareness is a relationship that's not working or an intention that's being thwarted. Dealing with a broken or dysfunctional relationship is the most intense way to take a look in the mirror – the very definition of self-awareness. It's the chance to ask,

- In what ways have I contributed to this situation?
- What do I need to learn?
- What have I been avoiding that this situation has given me the opportunity to confront?
- How can I see this person as a gift for my own growth and development?

Leaders who have faced these fires and developed “relational” self-awareness possess the capacity to lead with and project a sense of peace, calm and acceptance, even in the most challenging situations. They do this while courageously confronting the truth of circumstances in an honest, open way.

Leaders who don’t confront these situations and lack sufficient self-awareness can face any number of possible points for significant pain — each of which has the potential to hit them hard.

In a dramatic but realistic example, consider the VP of sales who has become disaffected in his work and has begun to worry about his progress in the company, his potential for promotion, his compensation and his scope of power. He’s aware that he’s angry, but he may not be conscious of the more subtle forces at work, like insecurity, fear of losing status or a deep (and possibly even accurate) sense of injustice. Furthermore, he has a boss he doesn’t trust and, therefore, no framework for moving toward an honest discussion.



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Meanwhile, his boss is unaware, insensitive or both to the VP's state of mind. Now, the perfect storm for passive-aggressive behaviors is in place – and so too, the potential for the all-too-common scenario of the VP slipping through the loopholes in his non-compete agreement to waltz off with key customers to a new job or his own business.

Of course, this outcome leaves the senior executive frustrated, angry and often blaming and discounting the other person for their behavior. In this situation, the executive isn't asking himself any self-reflective questions but rather reacting to the situation at hand.

So, if there's so much at stake, and such a huge upside to awareness, why don't more executives invest the time and energy to cultivate it? In my 20 years as an executive coach, here are some of the more common reasons I've encountered:

- Conscious or unconscious fears of dealing with emotional wounds.
- Concern it won't work in the long run.
- Worry they will appear weak.
- Too busy to take the time to learn about the role of emotions.
- Current culture at work does not support sharing at an emotional level.
- Not supported or modeled by leaders or peer group.
- Company does not value or pay for training in emotional intelligence.
- Corporate culture is focused on results, not relationships.
- Life outside of work is already out of balance and stressed.


- Thinking that working on one's self is self-indulgent and selfish.
- Believing emotional situations are best dealt with by a "get over it" attitude.

The bottom line is this: Most executives feel they are just too busy with what is in front of them to engage in this process. Between what is going on at work and what is going on at home, they are maxed out emotionally, physically, mentally and time-wise.

In addition, the area of self-awareness is one in which a silver bullet does not exist. It's a life-long process, not a problem to be solved in a two-day retreat or one-week seminar.

The first breakdown those with an intention to be an honest executive will encounter is *underestimating the time and emotional investment it takes to expand self-awareness and develop more honest relationships.*

The key is begin by realizing that self-awareness is not a one-shot deal but a life-long learning experience – one in which opportunities to practice present themselves every day in the workplace, not as time-consuming distractions but as fundamental opportunities to interact with honesty and compassion, build up the people around you and accelerate a culture of trust.



The key is begin by realizing that self-awareness is not a one-shot deal but a life-long learning experience.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE



Questions to Ponder

1. In the last three years, what have I done to build self-awareness? How much time have I invested in my personal self-development?
2. How honest am I being with myself in regard to my work, my relationships with others and my personal satisfaction?



Actions to Take

1. Share your reflections about investing time in self-development with a trusted colleague or your team. What ideas for taking action emerge? Set specific goals to increase self-awareness in the coming 12 months.
2. Research courses and programs, alone or with others, that are designed to increase self-reflection and build self-awareness.

PART 2:

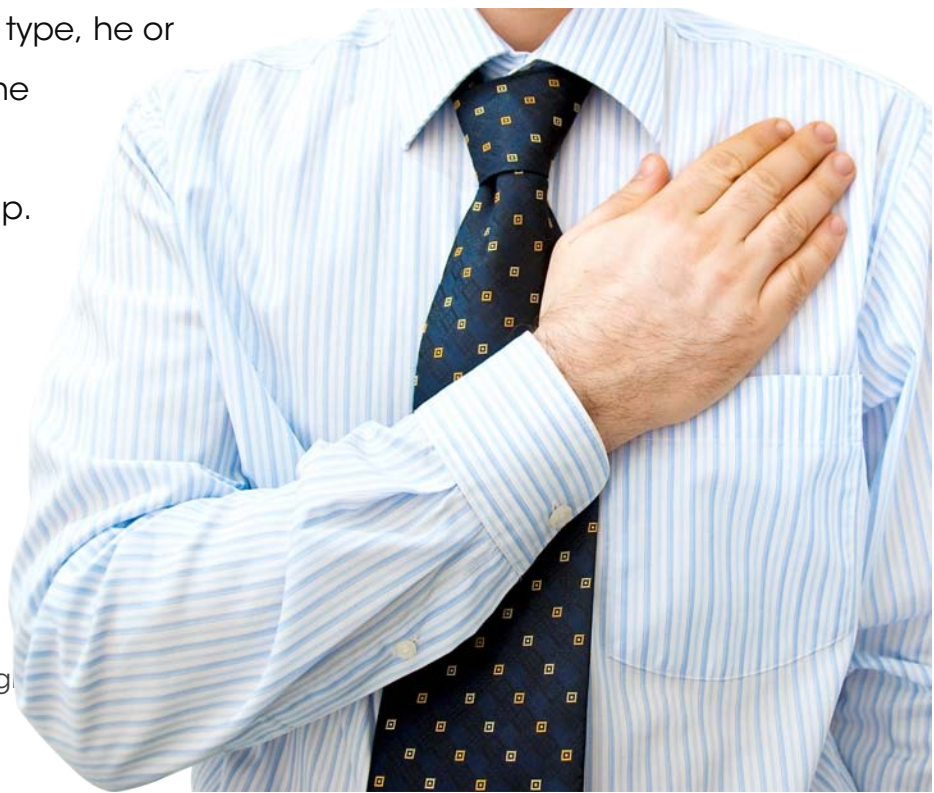
INTENTIONAL TRUTH TELLING

What's the depth of your commitment to leading with meaningful communication as a cornerstone of your leadership?

Most of the senior managers I work with have had some form of training to become better communicators. They may start by learning a model, hearing a theory and acquiring some tools, techniques and protocols, which they practice in a classroom setting and, hopefully, in real-life situations as well.

But unless they have committed to the rigorous application of what they've learned as a way of life — unless they say, "My communication defines who I am" — the tendency in the heat of battle is for learning to fade into the background and for their default style to take its place.

For example: If the CEO is a driving type, he or she probably doesn't listen well. If the senior executive tends to be accommodating, he won't speak up. If the manager's comfort zone is in facts and figures, she may have trouble making an emotional connection during the communication, and if the




president is naturally social, he or she may be worried that telling the truth might hurt someone's feelings.

It's not that these senior players aren't well-schooled in communication skills, it's that they don't consistently apply them. There are three primary reasons this happens.

First, they are overly focused on getting results and solving problems. They know what the communication skills are, they even know how they work, but in the daily grind of moving agendas forward, achieving results, meeting their earnings

targets and executing on strategies, they abandon their efforts. This results in a rejection of the time-consuming practice of engaging at a human level.



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The second challenge is a lack of understanding about the role that complex human emotions play and their constant presence behind the scenes. Whether an executive has done work in this area or is new to these ideas, it is crucial to understand how emotional land mines can sabotage even the simplest conversation.

For example, I worked with a prominent chairman who is one of the most sensitive, kind-hearted leaders I've ever known. He, his CEO and his CFO had known each other and worked together for more than a decade. As the company grew, financial disclosure and transparency requirements increased, and so did the need to talk about them. During one increasingly heated discussion about executive expenses, the chairman unexpectedly exploded. Voices raised, emotions became visible and serious tension filled the room.

It could have ended there, leaving the chairman with unresolved resentment and the CEO and CFO in the difficult position of having to deal with the issues at hand while walking on eggshells.


Instead, the work we were doing together meant that the door was open to have an authentic, albeit difficult, conversation about what had happened. The chairman was able to identify that two of his emotional hot buttons had been touched on: He felt that his integrity was being challenged and that his choices on how he used the resources he himself had earned to support his family and his philanthropic interests were being criticized.

For him, the two themes of integrity and protection of family were visceral. From his perspective, he had earned everything he owned by the sweat of his brow – and by taking enormous financial risks that involved his family's ultimate security.

When the smoke cleared, and each person was able to honestly communicate their experience, intentions and emotions, it became obvious that the CFO and CEO didn't have any judgment about the chairman's choices. In fact, they supported him. They had only two motives: to meet the reporting needs of the organization and to reduce risk.

By staying in the conversation, these three men who already trusted and cared about each other were able to move to an even deeper level of honesty and disclosure. Had the chairman not been aware of the critical nature of keeping communication open and on track and committed to the goal of executive honesty, the outcome would have been quite different.

Lastly, there is a natural discomfort with the level of honesty required for true communication to occur. Most people, leaders included, are not accustomed to making themselves vulnerable and are not paying attention to what is running beneath the surface of their conversations and interactions – or those of the people they are engaging with and trying to influence.



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Given these three elements – the pressing needs of business, the ever-present role of emotions beneath the surface and the discomfort of being more open and exposing of one's feelings and motives – is it any wonder that effective communication skills are not being regularly applied?

Executives who have committed themselves faithfully to practicing these communication skills and who are self-aware know – in spite of whatever intense feelings and job stresses they may be feeling – that it's their job as a leader to bring about connection at the deepest levels. Their ability to speak with care and honesty tells the true story of their commitment to leading in an authentic manner.

When this commitment is modeled by the leader and becomes a part of the company culture, followers become accustomed to trusting that what is said is the truth, even though it may be difficult to share and experience. As a result, hidden agendas are diminished, the probability of buy-in among teams increases and things move faster.

Executives who fail to embrace this way of communicating do so at their own peril. Fundamentally, what it takes to be an honest executive is simply *to be honest*. It also

takes the recognition that any application of methods that is not underwritten by true caring and clear meaning will resonate as insincere at best – and manipulative at worst. At the core of honest communication is the conscious intent to be “careful.” Not the kind of careful that comes from the fear of receiving a negative reaction or having to manage someone else’s expectations but a careful understanding of the self, careful listening to words, careful sensing of emotions, careful communication and careful follow-through on intentions.

In this case, careful literally means “full of care.” It implies a leader with a genuine interest in understanding the intentions, thoughts, feelings and motivations of the people he is trying to influence.

Meaningful, honest communication occurs when the leader is clear about his true intentions, judgments, emotions and core motivations. What are the thoughts that drove you to express your truth? Even if you know the details of what you want to communicate, do you know why you are saying it? And are you prepared to share that? It is the combination of both this care and meaning that embodies the definition of the honest executive.

When we actually take a look at the depth of complexity required to really communicate in the whirlwind of daily business demands and human emotions, is it any wonder that we end up not understanding each other and that confusion, resentment and frustration are instead the norm?

Despite these obstacles, executives with an eye toward improving honest communication can do so, provided they engage in a thoughtful examination of the following:

Awakening the desire for and/or deepening the commitment to careful and meaningful communication


When all is said and done, executives who embrace this way of working do so because they have answered the question, “What’s in it for me?” Can you discover good reason(s) for investing the time and energy necessary to achieve this level of honesty? Some of the more common reasons executives have expressed include:

- They know or sense there is a problem but don’t know what it is.
- The company/team is doing great but could be doing better.
- A known communication problem is negatively affecting business.
- Reduction of personal stress.
- Lessening resistance to change.
- A greater sense of security that they are getting an accurate picture of reality.
- Surfacing the best quality ideas, because no one is afraid to speak.
- Deciphering the spin and self-interest of competing team members.

While answering the question, “What’s in it for me?” is one way of awakening this desire, many executives come to this path through receiving feedback from others. When the team members closest to the leader are asked to give input in surveys or 360-degree assessments, the leader has the opportunity to see where they are losing influence with staff. The truths revealed can often be the catalysts that inspire the executive to adopt the principles of more honest communication.

Confronting discomfort with self-disclosure, openness and the vulnerability that comes with it

A crucial part of honest communication is facing the discomfort and vulnerability that comes with the self-disclosure of one's motives, intentions and feelings. Any executive brave enough to share in this way must confront concerns about how they may be perceived or even exploited. The upside of this transparency is that people don't have to interpret or decipher your communications and, as a result, are far more comfortable sharing their own truths.



Any executive brave enough to share in this way must confront concerns about how they may be perceived or even exploited.

This process of self-disclosure always begins with a deep dive into both your motivation and intention in any given situation.

For example: It's not uncommon to hear executives debate a particular solution to a problem with the implied motive that they are only proposing what is in the best interest of the company.

Upon closer examination, there can be additional, unspoken dynamics at work. Underneath, there is often the reality that each viewpoint is driven by personal goals and divergent philosophies – all framed as being for the benefit of the customer or company.

Honest executives learn to be curious about not only their own motivations but their intentions as well. They learn to search for the real meanings beneath what they are saying – and then have the courage to disclose them.

Just consider how many times you've said something, and the other person had a reaction quite different from the one you were hoping for. What you end up saying is, "That's not what I meant. That's not my intention." The executive suite is fraught with constant misinterpretations brought on by the lack of declaring a clear intent. And without a specific, stated intent, the listener will default to making assumptions.

These are the dynamics that go on daily beneath the surface of what's being said at work. Does it take longer to dig for true intent and honest feelings and disclose them? Yes. But in the end, the leaders who adopt this way of working have an intuitive understanding that this takes less time and energy than would be consumed by operating with low buy-in and hidden agendas while correcting false assumptions.

By regularly practicing careful, meaningful communication in a shared work environment, you will grow your comfort, skills and abilities in the dynamics of action and reaction in daily conversations, clear formation of intent and access to inner motivations. Through self-examination and a practice of self-disclosure, over time, being an honest executive will become second nature.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE



Questions to Ponder

1. How do people perceive my effectiveness as a communicator? What is my reputation in the company as a leader? When people know they have to encounter me, one on one or in a meeting, do they eagerly look forward to it? Or do they get overly nervous or, worse, dread any encounter?
2. Have I invited people to tell me when my communication style is causing me to lose influence as a leader? Do I exhibit behaviors or send signals that cause people to shut down or avoid telling me the truth?
3. How confident am I that members of my team are always honest with each other?



Actions to Take

1. Schedule an off-site management retreat that is specifically focused on opening the lines of communication with total honesty.
2. Engage a retreat facilitator with experience in getting people to be more open than they are used to being with each other, one who can keep the environment safe and teach skills for disclosure and risk-taking.

PART 3:

THE GIFT OF HIGHER POWER

What is my worldview, and how does it impact my effectiveness as a leader?

While many business leaders have achieved a degree of self-awareness and the effective exchange of ideas that comes with it, if they are missing true caring as a motive for all they say and do, they are missing one of the fundamental tenets of what it is to be an honest executive. Executives who lead from the head only make the entirety of their focus hitting their metrics, moving the ball forward and driving their strategies to fruition.


As a leader, a large part of your job is to care for those around you. Yes, you're focused on business issues, but those issues get attended to through individuals. And it makes a difference to see that this person, like you, has a life outside of the business. They are a mother, father, son or daughter. It is this capacity to care about people and connect with them as individuals that makes great leaders.



For example: Take the big kahuna sitting in the C-suite who needs to give a team member some negative feedback. Has he made a decision to care about this person as an integral part of the communication? In other words, can the leader say to himself, “I see this person as intelligent and well-meaning, but their abrasive style is causing problems. Is my true motive to help them succeed, or am I focused on putting a stop to their abrasiveness only because it’s impacting my results?” This example illustrates the contrast between a focus on the leader serving their own needs versus serving the needs of others.

So how then does a leader come to care, enlarge their capacity for caring and expand their heart space? It’s something that doesn’t come from a training class but begins with a greater sense of personal responsibility, purpose and vision. Before honest executives can even begin to look outward with a greater degree of sensitivity, they have to look inward to see what it is they really believe to be true about their larger purpose.

In my work with executives, I consider it crucial that they ask themselves the question, “How does my worldview impact my ultimate effectiveness as a leader?” And effectiveness must be defined beyond the limits of financial statements to include the attributes of inspiration, motivation and caring. While the marketplace may measure your metrics, your people measure your heart.



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The extent to which leaders can answer these questions gives them a frame of reference from which to do everything from setting stock expectations to strategic planning.

It is this connection to something larger than themselves that inclines them to the qualities of sensitivity, love and compassion that they can execute on. It is their ability to bring their sense of the divine — whether they call that God, nature, the universe, love, etc. — into the way they work.

But what about those executives who don't believe in the divine by any name? They usually choose to work within the confines of a humanitarian context where service is a virtue and uncontrolled events are accepted as matters of fate, giving them ample room to sow the seeds of inspiration.

In my 20 years of experience, any transformation to a more heart-oriented leadership approach has had a better chance of succeeding when there is an acknowledgement of our inability to reach our highest goals and be our best selves by our sheer will alone. And while there is no hope for a better past, the power of the divine in any form can inform the future and be the context an honest executive lives and breathes by.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE



Questions to Ponder

1. What exactly is my worldview? What do I believe about:
 - a) The nature and first cause of my existence. How do I explain my creation? The creation of the universe? What is my rationale for these beliefs?
 - b) What do I believe is the ultimate purpose of my life? What is my personal mission during my earthly existence? What is my rationale for these beliefs?
 - c) What gives my life meaning? What provides a sense that I matter? What is my rationale for these beliefs?
 - d) What is my destiny? What are my beliefs about my death? What do I believe about dimensions of consciousness or existence after I am declared dead by those who are still living?



Actions to Take

1. Schedule a day away from all distractions, go to a secluded setting and meditate on the above questions. Write down your answers in a journal. Put the journal away for a month, return to the same place and read your journal. How well is your worldview working for you?
2. Pick a trusted partner or friend and share your individual answers to the above worldview questions. Engage in discussion with others who hold different worldviews and share how you each arrived at your beliefs.

PART 4:

HUMILITY AND THE HONEST EXECUTIVE

Can you build your capacity to care so that you serve others before yourself?

So far in this book, we have examined the most common reasons why so few executives have mastered honesty in a way that produces a consistent experience of care, trust and connection with those around them. The first part explored the time-consuming nature of choosing to develop the capacities necessary to become an honest executive. The second discussed the level of commitment required to develop an effective style of honest leadership. The third stressed the importance of articulating your worldview and how it impacts your effectiveness as a leader.




This fourth and final segment of the book brings us to the core of this endeavor: the essential trait of humility that must coexist with purpose to form the foundational character of the honest executive.

John Dickson, in his book *"Humilitas"* (Zondervan, 2011), provides a deep understanding of the word "humility" by looking at the root definition and history of the word itself.

"The peculiar Western meaning of humility derives from the usage of the Hebrew-speaking Jews, Latin-speaking Romans and Greeks, in particular Greek-speaking Christians of the first century... in all three languages the word used to describe humility means, 'low, as in low to the ground: the Hebrew *anawa*, the Greek *tapeinos*, and the already-familiar Latin *humilitas*. Used negatively, these terms mean to be put low, that is, 'to be humiliated.' Positively, they mean to lower yourself or 'to be humble.'"

Most senior executives are familiar with the significant difference between these two meanings. In my experience, I have watched far too many examples of executives delivering humiliation or receiving it from others. Either way, the toxic effect on relationships is undeniable. Trust is severely eroded, and efforts to repair post-humiliation damage can border on hopeless.



In my experience, I have watched far too many examples of executives delivering humiliation or receiving it from others.

By its nature, the negative form of *humilitas* is vivid and noticeable, if for no other reason than its true ugliness and affront to the human psyche. Conversely, in its

positive form, humility often simply goes unnoticed. It operates by not calling attention to itself.

Jim Collins happened upon this irony during research for his best-selling book, *"Good to Great"* (Harper Collins, 2001). His formula for what he calls Level 5 Leadership, i.e., Humility + Will, emerged in spite of efforts to minimize the impact of any single leader on the success or failure of the organization.

"We were not looking for Level 5 leadership or anything like it. In fact, I gave the research team explicit instructions to downplay the role of top executives so that we could avoid the simplistic credit-the-leader or blame-the-leader thinking that is so common today," said Collins.

When the dust had settled, the researchers had clearly identified that the CEOs of companies that had made the transition from good to great tended to possess the paradoxical presence of both steely determination (will) and compelling modesty (humility).

As honest executives discover more about the inner wiring of their motives, emotions and vulnerabilities, they have their best chance to see themselves as they are most likely to be seen by others. Add to this the courage to invite honest feedback with sincere commitment to behavioral change, and we step closer to closing the gap between how we see ourselves and how others see us – with humility.

There is great danger, however, in thinking that self-development is all about us. It isn't. The irony is that embracing what it means to be an honest executive requires learning to act with humility in our relationship with others.

This means your self-awareness and skills must exist in the context of the bigger purpose, a purpose that is in the service of others.


The world is overrun with talk about self-help, self-development and self-awareness; unfortunately, a good portion of this is totally detached from the essence of humility.

What's your motivation to figure out why you are the way you are?

Why would you want to set yourself up to get feedback about your defects, flaws and vulnerabilities?

Only one reason: to become more effective in your connection with others. To become more open, honest, trustworthy and authentic. And why would you want that?

Not to make more money, earn more status or retire to a tropical beach where you can lie in the sun all day sipping Mai Tais but so you can serve others to the best of your God-given capacities. The honest executive exists to see others succeed first, and puts his or her own needs after that.



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Until the self-reflection and the skills you've developed are turned outward, you are stuck within your own internal focus, and caring about others' successes won't motivate you. At some level, we all battle our selfish nature, which is baked into being human. Embracing the virtue of humility is the essential antidote.

Dickson also provides a fabulous working definition:

"Humility is the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself."

So how does one try to build, acquire or cultivate humility? Here are four distinct ways to start.

First, recognize that humility is not a skill or competency. It is a virtue – a human quality that is a component of the character you are developing. Think of other virtues such as compassion, kindness, honesty and courage. They can't be learned in a classroom, but they can be emulated, modeled and cultivated.

How much time do you spend reflecting on your character?

Second, take a good look at what you love most. What do you value? To what and to whom have you assigned meaning in your life? As Socrates espoused in "The Apology":

"You are a citizen of a great and powerful nation. Are you not ashamed that you give so much time to the pursuit of money and reputation, and honors, and care so little for truth and wisdom and the improvement of your soul?"


Third, fake it 'til you make it. When things are going wrong at work or home, thoughts and emotions can become focused on resentments, anger, sadness, frustration and towering, overwhelming problems. One response can be to "act as if." Act happy, act accepting, act forgiving, act hopeful. Yes, for now it is all an act – we fake it all until real changes occur. A great deal of recent research on cognitive-behavioral therapy

has proven that one's thoughts can actually be changed by actions as much as actions are generated by one's thoughts. When negative emotions are working you over based on what you are thinking, can you "reframe the picture"? Take the reality and tell a completely different story about it – a story that assumes positive intentions, not negative ones.

So the next time you want to be at the front of the line, take credit for the project or lead a group discussion – try acting in a humble manner. Consciously put others ahead of yourself, even when your strongest voice is screaming, "It's not fair!" or, "I am going to lose!"

Fourth and finally, keep in mind the other half of Jim Collins' Level 5 leadership: will. While you must put others first, you are the leader, and your courage and determination to execute and achieve results against all odds is as important as your humility in service to your team. Whether caring about others and putting them first comes naturally to you or is more of an effort, without the component of powerful will, the leadership equation is incomplete.

Unless your self-discovery and commitment to honesty lead you to the virtue of humility, you will have missed the boat. You may be successful for a time by sheer force of will and your powerful persona, but you will eventually lose followers.



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By cultivating and practicing humility, and putting it to use in the service of others, you will find your true essence as the Honest Executive.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE



Questions to Ponder

1. When was the last time you were conscious of placing someone else's needs ahead of your own? How did it feel? What happened?
2. When was the last time you did something effective and were pleased with the result but deflected the acknowledgement to others, such as your team or co-workers?



Actions to Take

1. Make a list of people you know or have known whom you consider to be humble. What qualities did they have that you admired?
2. Look around your world at present and find a few places where you can distinctly practice humility by serving the needs of others by subordinating your need for recognition and status.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I spent the first half of my professional career working for others. I always had a boss but held positions of leadership where I was the boss over others as well. In those 18 years, I was often on the receiving end of terrible leadership communication and low-trust relationships. As a leader, I was sometimes responsible for equally problematic communication that did not help my cause with those I tried to lead. I learned from these early years the critical importance of being an honest executive.

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In the second half of my career, I found my calling working with CEOs and their teams as a facilitator and executive coach. Over the past two decades of this work, I have concluded that what is missing from being an honest executive is the transformation from “Let me be brutally honest” to the more compassionate leader who finds his heart.

If you lead with compassion and humility and speak your truth from a caring motivation in every relationship, people will follow you, trust you and come to love you for it. Then you can truly embrace what it means to be “The Honest Executive.”

ABOUT KEVIN MCHUGH



Kevin McHugh is the president of JKM Management Development, a management consulting firm specializing in increasing organizational performance and coaching business leaders to develop emotional awareness, conflict resolution capabilities, and maximize executive effectiveness.

Over the past twenty years, Kevin has traveled the world facilitating retreats and off-sites within North America, South Africa, Australia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Europe.

McHugh has also served as an executive coach to hundreds of CEOs, helping them to improve their personal and professional leadership competencies. His clients have included: American Funds Distributors, Anthem, Estée Lauder, Parker Hannifin, Sprint-Nextel, The Entrepreneurs' Organization, CEO Roundtable and Vistage.

In addition to his work as a facilitator and an executive coach, Kevin is a long-time educational resource for the internationally recognized Young Presidents' Organization and its graduate group, The World Presidents' Organization. Kevin is a featured presenter at their annual Global Leadership Conference and works with various chapters throughout the year.

Kevin's unique personal story — coupled with his significant business experience — offers his clients and audience a blend of humor, insight, and engagement that leaves them compelled toward action to personal change.

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