"YOU’RE FIRED!"

Thanks to Donald Trump, these words have become a part of the American vocabulary. Unfortunately, one Monday morning 20 years ago, I, too, heard those words drifting across the table—directed at me! I was stunned; my stomach churned. I had accepted a position 18 months earlier as COO, knowing that I was the first outside person hired in 23 years. I worked hard to bring about change, but quite frankly, I didn’t know much about leading change. I also didn’t know much about leading others. I’d had success in my previous position and my pride and ego let me assume I would be successful in this new position, as well.

I call my firing a Humpty Dumpty moment. I had built a wall of pride, ego and power between myself and the employees I had been asked to lead. As that wall got wider and higher, my integrity was challenged. I was more worried about protecting my image than doing the right thing. My career was derailed by a lack of integrity.

Careers get derailed when we make poor choices as leaders. Sometimes the derailment involves a complete crash and burn. Our career is over and we never have the opportunity to lead again. Bernie Madoff, Ken Lay (Enron), Steve McNair (Tennessee Titans) and Raj Rajaratnam (Galleon) are either in prison or dead. Their Humpty Dumpty moments meant they “couldn’t be put together again.” Other times, our derailment and failure as leaders involves going off the tracks and wrecking. A lot of hard work—through the development of a moral compass—and passion may eventually enable us to lead again. Martha Stewart, Eliot Spitzer, Anthony Weiner and Charles Rangel all have the opportunity to rebuild integrity and trust by matching their words with their actions.

We’re all human and, like the leaders mentioned above, we will make poor choices as we lead in business. Integrity not only involves honoring our word, but sincerely apologizing when we’re wrong and making amends as quickly as possible. Integrity is the foundation of trust for any leader. Unfortunately, the power of leadership often erodes our integrity. Abraham Lincoln’s famous quote: “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power” sounds a warning bell for us all. In his book Good to Great, Jim Collins identifies one of the characteristics of Level Five

7 Keys to maintaining integrity in the workplace

—Nancy Reece

My Humpty Dumpty moment.
leaders as humility. In his follow-up book, How The Mighty Fall, he identifies the first sign of a business being in trouble as unrestrained arrogance and hubris, the exact opposite of humility. What is it that causes a humble, Level Five leader to become a raging egomaniac? The toxic cocktail of pride and power.

So, how do we avoid leadership falls and derailment? The following are seven keys for business men and women who want to maintain integrity as they lead.

1. Identify your core values. What matters most in your life? Faith? Family? Career? Wealth? Integrity? Courage? Health? Define each of those values in your own terms then prioritize them. Write a values creed by identifying what your life will look like when your actions match your stated values. Keep them framed on your desk where you can see them and be reminded of what’s most important in your life. It’s easy to get off course and derail if we don’t have a moral compass for our leadership.

2. Identify your Achilles’ heel. Everyone has a weakness. In the wake of the Anthony Weiner scandal, NPR ran a program that asked why so many men seem to have their careers ruined by sex. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bill Clinton and Dominique Strauss-Kahn are all leaders whose Achilles’ heel was women and sex. Greed is another common weakness—a greater desire for financial gain than for doing what is right. Martha Stewart, Charles Rangel and Ken Lay are all examples of leaders led astray by the overwhelming desire for wealth.

Taken together, pride and power can lead to a lethal chink in your armor. When you find yourself thinking you deserve success, seeking the limelight or putting down others, these twin beasts are rearing their ugly heads. The second step in avoiding leadership derailment is to identify your weakness, or the spot where there is a chink in your armor. Write it down in black and white and acknowledge your vulnerability.

3. Play “what if.” Once you’ve identified your Achilles’ heel, imagine what would happen if you got caught. What would you say to your family? What would the headline in tomorrow’s paper be? What would happen to your family, your business and your friendships? Would you be in prison? Financially ruined? A well-thought-out session of “what if” can make real the potential consequences of falling prey to a lack of integrity.

4. Enable “ketchup conversations.” Suppose you go out to lunch, eat a hamburger and get ketchup on your chin. You then go to meet with an investor, a board member and a client in the afternoon. When you arrive home and walk through the door, your spouse says, “You have ketchup on your chin.” Your first thought is: “Why didn’t anyone tell me?” The better question for leaders to ask is this: “Did I create a safe space for someone to tell me?” If pride, ego and power are changing how we lead our businesses, we can’t expect anyone to tell us what we’re doing wrong unless we create a safe atmosphere for them to do so. The term “ketchup conversations” refers to when our barriers and defenses come down and we listen with open minds and ears to what the other person needs to say. We don’t get defensive, attack the person bringing the message, or retaliate in any way. We get our ego out of the way and listen and learn.

5. Have courageous friends. Real friends have the guts and the courage to get in your face when they see you doing something wrong. Real friends are ones you can share your Achilles’ heel with and trust them not to pull their punches when they see you going down the wrong path. They will challenge you, encourage you, be honest with you and make you mad. They will confront you when they see pride and ego overtaking humility. Be warned, however, that courageous friends can help you maintain your integrity only if you are open and honest with them about your struggles, your weaknesses and your ego. They’ll let you know when you have ketchup on your face.

6. Identify and counteract stress. Leading a business involves the constant challenges of putting out daily fires and dealing with growing numbers of employees, increasing margins and delivering results to key stakeholders. The more stress we’re under, the more we sacrifice by working harder and longer. Under these circumstances, we all default to a place of power and pride. We become less effective as leaders and our Achilles’ heel is more exposed. Being able to identify when you are experiencing stress and acknowledging that you are more vulnerable during this time builds protective barriers that will enable you to lead with integrity.

7. Become an integrity fanatic. Be passionate about doing the right thing. When you make a poor choice, don’t cover it up or put image first. In 2008, the Peanut Corporation of America knowingly shipped peanut products that were tainted with salmonella, resulting in a recall of peanut butter. The company’s lack of integrity resulted in eight deaths and 501 illnesses in 43 states. They attempted a cover-up and crashed and burned. In 2009, Kraft issued an immediate voluntary recall of pistachios due to possible salmonella contamination. While several illnesses were reported, there were no deaths. They acted with integrity and are still in business today.

My Humpty Dumpty leadership fall turned out not to be a crash and burn. I moved on to another position, humbled, aware of my Achilles’ heel of ego and pride, and was determined to learn more about this thing called leadership. I took a hard look in the mirror to understand how my lack of integrity had destroyed trust and derailed my leadership. I reflected, developed a moral compass and became an integrity fanatic. It doesn’t mean I won’t fail in the future, but I have put people and processes in place to do all I can to avoid “a great fall.” There are consequences to our poor choices, but these seven keys will help you stay on the track to success.

Nancy Reece is a senior consultant and speaker with The Human Capital Group, Inc. in Brentwood, Tenn. She teaches leadership and organizational behavior as adjunct faculty for Lipscomb University’s Graduate School of Business and writes the Integrity First column for the Nashville Business Journal.