

Three seemingly simple questions can have an enormous impact on your decisions, affecting integrity and quality.

The Integrity Zone

Practical Applications Today

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In my first article, “High Quality Performance Rests on Personal Integrity” in the Fall 2007 issue, I described a meltdown of personal integrity and a pattern of woeful decision making among some of us on the Nixon White House staff. One of those decisions led to a criminal covert operation as part of the Pentagon papers investigation and eventually to Watergate and the resignation of President Richard Nixon. That first article concluded by introducing a model for decision making called *The Integrity Zone*.

I developed *The Integrity Zone* model over several years to show how to avoid making the kind of disastrous decisions we made during the Nixon years and also to demonstrate how you can improve your chances to make right and good decisions in the future.

In every organization, from the most senior to the most junior levels, every important decision is made by a human being, and each of those decisions impacts quality concerns for an organization. *The Integrity Zone* model, designed for

adaptation to decision making at any level, helps to ensure that decisions have integrity and, by extension, quality is assured in the organization.

The model posits three questions, which, if answered affirmatively, can help guide decisions and keep decision makers safe and successful. These questions may appear simple, but depending on the scope and nature of the decision, answering them can be quite complex. The questions address three conceptual levels: intellectual, moral, and the spiritual. They are listed below:

- Is the decision whole and complete?
- Is the decision right?
- Is the decision good?

The first question lays the foundation. Integrity requires us to think decisions through to their second-, third-, and fourth-order consequences. Does your decision reflect a sense of wholeness and completeness? Wholeness describes something that is undivided and undiminished, and it is a critical aspect of integrity.

The second question focuses on the moral requirements. You must ask, "Is this the right thing to do?" Your actions should be in line with core values such as truth, honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility, and compassion. The results will tend to create an atmosphere of trust. Morality is inherently interpersonal, and you need to consider how your decisions will affect people at the most basic level.

The third question asks, "Is it good?" Will your action be beneficial to others? Living in *The Integrity Zone* inspires and elevates thought and potential. Affirmative answers to these questions will help ensure a good—a beneficial—result and a more perfect outcome. You have stayed true to your inner sense of good—the spiritual—and to your conscience.

An example of this kind of integrity-based reasoning in the public-policy sphere occurred when I served on Nixon's staff. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who later was elected to the U.S. Senate three times from the state of New York, would invite several of the younger staff members to his office in the basement of the West Wing of the White House on Friday afternoons for a "bull" session on policy decision making. He would regale us with stories about how badly some decisions turned out because of the policy makers' inability to understand the full consequences of a decision.

One topic that especially concerned him was the narrow focus at that time of U.S. drug policy on law enforcement, interdiction, and imprisonment to the virtual exclusion of treatment, rehabilitation, education, and research. He admonished us that simply putting drug users in prison without offering any means to overcome their addictions would well exacerbate the problem. Imprisonment often led to more drug crimes rather than fewer. He convinced us to expand our policy options, evaluate each one thoroughly, and then select and fund those measures that would reduce the harm and the crime associated with drugs. He lectured us on the notion that this was the right thing to do. By acting compassionately and offering treatment to all those who asked for it, more people could live decent and useful lives. It was also a good

thing to do because our society would benefit from the positive participation of those who were able to work rather than stay outside the economic mainstream because of their addictions.

The president agreed with this broader policy approach and directed us to develop the legislation to implement it. This led to a thoroughly revamped drug policy regime that, in just three years, increased treatment, reduced crime, and kept more addicts at work and at home. The lesson here is that thinking holistically—a crucial step in the "whole and complete" portion of *The Integrity Zone*—will allow you to better understand broader societal impacts of a decision, leading to the ability to identify the right and good choices.

That drug policy example was provided by some of my work in government. Now, let's look at how the model applies to quality concerns in the business and nonprofit spheres. Business and organizational standards such as ISO 9000, Six Sigma, and total quality management (TQM) help create error-free corporate processes, a crucial pursuit for every organization that strives to be competitive and efficient, but none of these quality assurance systems helps direct an organization's people and strategy toward the right and the good.

At the level of purely corporate process, ethical issues of right and good aren't usually considered. Instead, corporations tend to focus on questions such as, "Will it work?" "Will it be profitable?" "Does it

create problems for others in the organization?" "Is the final product of high quality?" This is the same mistake I detailed in my first article, that is, the focus on procedural results to the exclusion of contextual questions. The pursuit of defect-free procedures is critical for a corporation's pursuit of quality, of course, but in no way helps place the

organization in a societal context, and in no way helps it get beyond the first question in *The Integrity Zone*.

The first question—"Is the decision whole and complete?"—relates most closely to standard quality management systems like ISO 9000, TQM, and Six Sigma. Whole and complete implies understanding

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the legal, economic, procedural, and implementation (manufacturing) issues around a decision, but issues of production quality, whether from manufacturing, service, or information sectors, never exist in a vacuum. In reality, the integrity of an organization's output relies not just on maintaining high internal quality standards, but also on understanding the broader impacts on society and the physical environment.

The second and third *Integrity Zone* questions require that you, as a decision maker, are able to examine your proposed action in a broader context. The second question, "Is the decision right?" examines the ethical considerations of the clear first-order consequences of your actions. The third question, "Is the decision good?" looks at the second-order consequences and beyond to truly understand the impact of your actions, or your company, on the greater good of society.

Why is it important that each organization extend its quality analyses beyond internal processes to understanding issues of right and good? For the most part, corporations operate in a day-to-day accountability vacuum, while at the same time their work has very real impacts outside the individual corporations. This lack of accountability has led to many of the negative environmental and social impacts that we see from some corporations. The most direct route to solving some of these problems is to encourage corporations to incorporate—in addition to quality management procedures—integrity-based decision-making ideals that, at each level of an organization from the boardroom down, encourage employees to act with integrity. A focus on personal integrity is an effective way to integrate ethics throughout corporate structures.

A specific example of the general lack of integral ethics in corporate action is the frequent failure of business economics to incorporate ecological and

societal costs. For far too long, businesses' economic decisions have allowed ecological and social costs to be treated as externalities. That is, when we examine the

bottom line of an economic decision, there isn't a line item for environmental and social costs that are shared or distributed among society as a whole. In the end, businesses have no mandate to ensure that the impacts of their actions benefit social systems and ecological systems, without which business could not exist in the first place.

Seen from the perspective of *The Integrity Zone*, this means that even a business that pursues high levels of quality improvements internally may fail to consider the second-, third-, and fourth-order consequences of its decision making. This is the place where *The Integrity Zone* truly has something to offer to the business of quality management: the extension of corporate quality ideas to broader, contextual issues of social and environmental costs.

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