



Redefining ROI

Investing in your Return On Integrity

John G. Blumberg

What if you got to the end of your career and realized you had totally dismissed the most powerful tool, the most authentic strategy, that would have ultimately defined your leadership?

It could have led to real success—ultimately determined your legacy. What if it was a tool (a strategy) that you always had right at your fingertips? More precisely, at your core.

As a fiscally-minded leader, you might be especially disappointed to know that it would have cost you nothing compared to the millions it might have saved. In certain cases, it would have saved some leaders... everything! Most importantly, it would have made everything you did more effective. Certainly richer.

Some discount it. Others ignore it. There have been only a few who have truly led with it.

Many have embraced the tip of the iceberg, then checked it off their list as if it were something that could be completed rather than lived. Some have been comfortable with it at the organizational level, but found it totally inappropriate to take to the personal level.

Some have thought it was the soft stuff, when the truth is that it was just too hard for them to do.

This tool, this strategy, is nothing new. In fact, it's as old as the human race. And everyone in a leadership position would know about it on an intellectual level, although few have ever taken the time to study it, to actually understand it. More importantly, even fewer have mustered the persistence to dig deep enough to personally discover it.

The majority, in positions of leadership, drifted while a number of their colleagues drowned. Few of them lived up to their enormous potential. And, by their negligence, let their followers down. It wasn't on purpose. But the consequences were the same.

We would rather work around it. Avoid it. Work on something seemingly much more sophisticated. Complexity makes us look smarter. Looking smart must be easier than being courageous. It must play better. But it can be wasteful. It wastes resources. More tragically, it wastes human potential and fulfillment.

Rather than some sophisticated diagram, it is more a dissection—yet an incredible journey of discovery, and connection. I'm talking about the discovery of your core values. You can ignore them. But they will never ignore you.

Core values are as old as the human race. Yet a leader can make them new again.

Leading and Living in 3D

There are a lot of things that a leader can lead without stepping into the very midst of it. Building what I call a Return On Integrity at a company is not one of them. A leader must step fully into the arena and actively live it before they are ever equipped to lead it. It is, first and foremost, a 3-Dimensional experience for the leader.

The leader at the top is the linchpin of this process. It may very well prove to be a leader's greatest challenge while simultaneously holding their most important potential. Building value with core values can certainly come from a grassroots effort. It's just not the ideal approach, and the results of this approach are rarely sustainable. It also undermines the credibility of leaders who have to be led to their own core by their followers!

The process of building a Return On Integrity also has a “3D” framework:

Dilemma

The process begins right where we are—immersed in the reality of our current dilemma. I define our dilemma as a painfully honest analysis of why building value with core values can be so evasive. It does little good to have a strategic plan unless we fully understand the obstacles that stand in our way. Some of those obstacles are obvious roadblocks and others are subtle or hidden like land mines. What can make this quite challenging to identify is that some of the obstacles are in essence really good things. Identifying these roadblocks and landmines isn’t designed to stifle your enthusiasm, but rather to spark your creativity.

Definition

Core values seem like a simple concept. But nothing could be further from the truth. They can become confusing quite quickly. It seems that most executives know all about core values. Yet when they decide to take a second look and engage in the process, the very first question someone will ask is, “Now what exactly is the definition of a core value?” It is an interesting question to ask when you already think you know all about it!

Destiny

This is a roadmap for a leader to follow. There are steps along the way that insure both momentum and traction. It will be harder than it looks. There will be two steps forward and one step back. Some days it will be one step forward and two steps back. It is why it will prove to be the greatest test of a leader's persistence and patience. It will also be one of their greatest opportunities to live out their own core values in guiding the process.

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Dilemma

Over the last several years, there has been increasing chatter about core values. On the surface, this would appear to be a good thing. It may, in fact, prove to be one of the greatest obstacles we face in motivating leaders to actually address core values.

You see, chatter stays on the surface. Chatter can create a perception of focus and progress. Often, it carries the deception of completion. One of the great challenges to solving a problem can be the perception that it has already been solved. My biggest fear is that core values have become the latest widespread veneer. Veneers are specifically designed to make something look like what it's not. The surface conceals what something is really made of—to make it look more valuable than it really is. Veneers work well on furniture, but not in organizations. If we discuss core values in only a shallow way, we allow the veneer approach to take hold. This is one of the reasons so many executives in leadership positions don't embrace core values. When core values are used as a veneer, they can clearly cause more harm than good. A lot more harm.

Our prior depth of understanding and experience of core values can create a huge dilemma. We begin with various assumptions. I had my own, which is what made the experience of writing *Return On Integrity* a much greater challenge than I ever imagined. It may very well explain

why my 1-year project became a 4-year journey. There is far more depth than meets the naked eye. It requires a lot more digging than you would think. And the more you dig, the deeper it calls you. It made me realize how very shallow my own perceptions had been on the potential of core values. I wasn't alone. On a consistent basis, in a discussion on core values, most everyone fairly quickly wanted to try to make the conversation about something else. I would predictably hear the words, "So what you are really talking about is _____." The consistency of these subconscious redirects made me realize that we faced a huge dilemma in fully understanding core values. It is hard to further understand something when you assume you have already reached the full depth at which something needs to be understood.

One of the most difficult aspects we need to understand are the obstacles that stand in the way. In writing *Return On Integrity*, I felt compelled to devote the first third of the book to "the problem" before ever beginning to focus on a possible approach for a solution. I simply knew that embracing the full truth of the problem was the first step in building momentum for a robust sustainable solution.

I tried to go beyond just tilling the soil of what stood in the way of building value with core values. Anything was fair game for analysis of its impact on core values. Solid business practices of great conventional wisdom were not excluded, including the pervasive and consistent metrics and

measurements we have so come to embrace. While the list is extensive, it was never meant to be an exhaustive list. It was more designed to stir the conscious and subconscious insights for a real leader to take a hard honest look at whatever may be imposing pressure on the core values of their organization. This, of course, included assessing the list of their organizational core values for substance, noting if anyone really embraced them, or possibly even knew them. Or maybe the list didn't exist at all.

Admitting the truth is the hardest step. It also proves to be a moment of freedom. Truth is the gateway to a new possibility. There is good reason to seek the truth and embrace it. Sometimes we can see and define the dilemma by looking around us. Other times it requires us to look within.

It has always amazed me how large trees can weather the most intense storms. Their root system provides enduring strength, and it helps them stand strong in the best and worst of circumstances. Our core is like the root system of a tree. Among people, leaders are no different. It is our core that gives us the strength to lead. It enables us to endure the onslaught of daily storms and sustained periods of challenge. A strong core also enables us to manage our ego in the midst of wild success.

A strong core holds us tight. If we are without a defined core, we likely hold tight to weak substitutes called attachments. These attachments come in many forms. Sometimes they are rules, policies, or procedures. Other times they are titles, positions, or power itself. For some, attachments are cliquish relationships. Attachments are the fertile ground where sacred cows are born. When we cling to attachments we tend to hold on to everything. Yet embracing your core values allows you to give confidently. There is a great difference between the impact of attachments and the impact of living one's core values; the results couldn't be further apart.

So why should we bother with building organizational value based on core values, especially when it won't be easy? It's a good question, one I have asked myself many times. It seems too hard. It sounds too vague. It feels too personal. It looks so un-businesslike! There has to be an easier path to lead others to success.

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I could keep going with great excuses and credible roadblocks. I'm sure you could pile on your own reservations. I wouldn't blame you. In fact, I would encourage you. I have a long list of my own! The fact is that it is much easier to figure out why building value with core values won't work than it is to actually build them.

But, why now? Why is it so important that we act now? Because our world is changing significantly. That has become a cliché, but it is so true. It's true in organizations around the world and it's true within various aspects of any individual organization. The single most significant change is speed. The speed at which we move. The speed at which decisions have to be made. The speed at which things change. And the world is in slow motion compared to the new world we are headed into! The only way to respond to this exponential increase in speed is to know decisively who you are and what you do at your core—personally and organizationally.

Beyond speed, another change we face is the progressively decentralized yet highly connected nature of organizations and the world. There are certainly some functioning hierarchical structures remaining in organizations, but the reality is that often these hierarchies are becoming more form than substance. Technology has significantly changed access to information and lines of communication inside and outside any organization.

We live in incredibly interesting times in business, in government, in churches, in communities, and in our homes. We haven't chosen these times; these times have chosen us. Even though these times are not our choice, they demand something from us nevertheless. I hope we'll deliver a response rather than a reaction.

A response requires a thoughtful and truthful inspection of the dilemma in which we find ourselves—collectively and individually.

Core values provide the content and framework for the most untapped and impactful organizational strategy available to any leader. It's not a complex strategy of intricate and complicated models. It's ruthlessly simple in nature, yet amazingly hard to sustain—unless you develop a depth of courage, patience, and persistence that can come only from an intentional connection to your own core.

Therefore, be clear: Connecting to your core values is strategic at the deepest level.

It is not a strategy to be forced upon others, but rather one that grows from within each individual. It is not an edict demanded from employees; it is a calling forth, a call to greatness. It is a strategy that plants seeds. It doesn't demand alignment; this strategy grows it. It doesn't force employee engagement; this strategy nurtures it. It doesn't orchestrate a mechanical

nature of “servicing” clients, customers, or patients; it ignites an individual desire to genuinely serve others.

It is a strategy that will make profound demands on you but will pay you back abundantly. It will create an ROI like you have never imagined possible.

But, for most leaders, this strategy will require a shift in how deeply they understand, embrace, and engage the strategic potential of personal and organizational core values. It will require courage to sustain. Patience will be necessary. Persistence is a must. It will require all of who you are. The bottom line is that to succeed in this strategy, you have to be completely invested—and you have to stay invested!

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Definition

Typically, when trying to understand something, we start by drawing on a definition from a dictionary or a Google search. Test me on this. Look up a few definitions for core values. I am pretty certain these definitions will be highly predictable and minimally helpful.

I was recently speaking at a lunch-and-learn with a small group of managing partners from law firms. One of the attorneys said, “John, can you give me a specific definition of what exactly is a core value?” He spoke just like a true attorney and I loved it! Which is why I smiled and simply replied, “I bet you would love that definition, wouldn’t you!” He smiled at my jest, as I followed up by saying, “We aren’t trying to use our intellectual and creative energy to come up with definition of core values. We are actually trying to discover the specific values within our core. As you are in the process of discovering your own core values, you will find what a core value actually is and you won’t need a dictionary definition to discover it.” It immediately seemed to make a great deal of sense to him.

Our core and our soul could very well be described as two sides of the same coin. If so, it would be a coin that holds great value when well spent.

More pragmatically, we might think of looking at our core like a colorful prism. When we hold it up to the light and slowly turn it, we see endless features. Yet the longer we look at it, even as we continue to turn it, we begin to see familiar patterns. Thinking of a kaleidoscope may help you imagine peering into your core. With a kaleidoscope there are a few basic ingredients through which you can see a variety of beautiful designs. Yet, over time the wide variety of designs tend to become familiar.

The process for defining your own core will be as much of an art as it is a science. It is far more complicated, challenging, and refreshing than picking some words from a list on a piece of paper or a few cards from a deck. This process isn't about getting to a quick answer. It's about embarking on an impactful process.

Most people don't know their own core values. The same is true for most executives in positions of leadership. This is a fact I didn't anticipate. I always assumed intentional core values were in play. I think most everyone makes this assumption. It's not the most dangerous assumption. The most dangerous assumption is thinking that you actually know what your own core values are. There is a really complicated and sophisticated assessment tool available to test your assumption. It's called—a blank sheet of paper!

If you want to evaluate whether someone knows their own personal core values, start with the simple question, “Do you think you know your own core values?” My experience is that most people will reactively reply with a tentative “I think so” or a confident “yes.” If so, then just give them a blank sheet of paper and kindly say, “Name them.” I have given this blank sheet of paper to thousands of people. My intention isn’t to give that blank sheet of paper as a test; it’s to give it as a gift. While most may feel like it’s a test, they generally realize it’s a wake-up call that exposes their own assumptions.

You will see what I mean when you first try to give it to your leadership team. You will see smart, analytical, successful, accomplished leaders start to stumble and grab for words. It’s their silent alarm, their wake-up call, and your gift to them. It’s not a gift they can return, because once unwrapped, the truth is out in the open. From that point forward their assumption is exposed.

Digging is hard work. And this is like digging a 100-foot water well. The essential resource, water, is there, waiting, whether you dig the well or not. But digging is hard. You see a whole lot of dirt before you reach the water. While digging for core values, you will come across a plethora of needs, wants, and behaviors. While they are not core values, they will prove to be incredibly helpful in bringing an understanding of the best expression of your core values.

It is critically important for a top leader to live the wrestling match of digging deep before they are ever in a position to attempt to lead others to do the same. A leader's understanding of their personal core values will not only equip them to lead others to explore their own, but it will also inform the process of uncovering, creating, or re-assessing your organizations' core values.

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Destiny

When writing *Return On Integrity*, I must admit I had mixed feelings about suggesting any type of organizational roll-out. My fear was of boxing in the potential of the process when my intent was simply to set forth a foundation to inspire your own process. Or, worse yet, in a world that reveres methodologies and process, I was afraid this process would offer a convenient opportunity to grab onto the familiar reliance on structure and framework. It would be easy to react to a sense of urgency to just get going and, in doing so, miss the leader's critical, deeper dive of struggle, reflection, insights, and ultimate commitment that brings real value to this process.

In the end, it seemed helpful to create a simple framework from which the creative juices of leaders could flow to generate their own approach. It turned-out to be a plentiful resource. The framework was made-up of four phases:

Reboot and Reset | This first phase is unique. It's not a span of time; it's a moment in time. It's the critical beginning. Everything we have been exploring up to this point is a prequel of each of the phases to come. I think of this Prequel Phase as the critical on-ramp to your four-part journey of the Destiny Road Map. It's important that your Reboot and Reset is not perceived, communi-

cated, or experienced as the grand rollout of just another new initiative. It has to be understood as a defined new beginning. It's crucial that everyone experiences it as a line in the sand.

It's a moment that separates the past from the future. While it clearly isn't about turning your back on the past, it is about turning over a new leaf. While much will be discovered in the months ahead, only one thing needs to be made clear in this moment: your genuine and authentic commitment to personal and organizational core values. You can make it clear you don't have all the answers, for you won't! You are just setting the direction and the trajectory forward.

Reveal and Refine | There are two key aspects to this phase: one is scaling the focus on personal core values throughout the organization and the other is initiating the focus on organizational core values. When defining personal values precedes organizational values, they inform the process and the struggle of defining organizational core values. It will also create a much greater sense of ownership for the organization's values.

Resonate and Remind | Ultimately, behaviors are the expression of intentionally defined core values. In this phase you will want to deepen the self-analysis on daily behaviors through much more tactical daily application and self-review. The Resonate and Remind phase is where things get harder. You may see a very natural resistance starting to incubate. Application leads

to personal and organizational accountability and this, of course, is never as fun as creating the values. This explains why core values have been seen as a soft topic, because we walk away from them as the process inevitably becomes difficult.

The key to leading this phase is keeping it fresh and evolving. You will soon see that on the other side of the bridge that takes you from identification to application is a wealth of incredible stories of application that will continue to keep it all fresh.

Resonate and Remind, Your Prequel experience, Reset and Reboot, Reveal and Refine, along with Resonate and Remind were all phases designed to build a foundation, gain traction, and eventually build momentum.

The final phase, **Reinforce and Reenergize**, is about making it all a way of life—the way forward. Up to this point, it's been important to get individuals to own their part of the process, starting with their individual core values and then intersecting those values with the values of the organization. Nothing will build a stronger foundation for building a return on integrity than this personal ownership. In this phase the emphasis shifts to everyone owning the whole process. While you still lead, this is about inspiring everyone else to own it all. Engaging the creativity and involvement of everyone is key to being able to Reinforce and Reenergize.

The Subtle Dilemma

There are two great hurdles that leaders must overcome: First, abandoning the feeling that you have this all figured out. It takes a very humble confidence (in that order) to make this work. Your personal digging will be one of the hardest things you will ever do. And most rewarding if you stick with it. Second, realizing the implications of minimal or no investment in core values, you could go with a gut-feel or intuition about your core values, keeping out of the details.

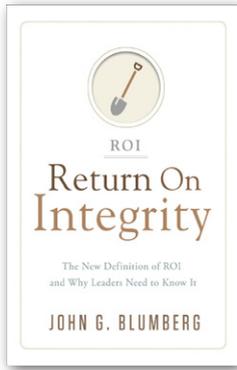
I'm reminded of a quote I scripted for my first book on values, *Good to the Core*. I had no idea how many people would relate to the quote, although I should have been given my own life experience:

“We don’t go running away from our values, we go drifting away.

And one day we wake-up in a place we never meant to be, drifting in a direction we would have never chosen.”

When it comes to a break-down of values, it doesn't generally happen overnight. It happens over time. **It may be the very reason while it is worth investing your time, heart and soul in building a return on integrity.** 📖

Info



BUY THE BOOK | Get more details or buy a copy of [Return on Integrity](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS | Simply put, John G. Blumberg is inspiring a movement among top executives to engage the intersection of personal and organization core values as the most impactful and untapped resource available to them as a leader. He and his wife, Cindy, live in Naperville, Illinois, where they raised their three children, Ryan, Kelly and Julie. He can be reached at www.BlumbergROI.com.

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