

Integrity and Accountability for UN Staff
Part One: Navigating the Terrain

The UN has 17 core competencies. The two discussed in this article are particularly helpful for guiding us through the myriad of moral challenges—internal and external—in UN work.

Kelly O'Donnell



Believing is seeing.

Illustration: courtesy Marc Rosenthal (<http://www.marc-roenthal.com>)

As both a psychologist and a UN representative for the World Federation for Mental Health, I am keenly curious about what helps bring out the best and the worst of my colleagues in the UN and other sectors. And myself. I am especially interested in how the UN's approach to competencies and values, and in particular the moral-based areas of integrity and accountability, can support staff as they traverse the troubled terrain of our world.

At the core of integrity is the commitment to live consistently with one's values (moral goodness). At the core of accountability is the commitment to take responsibility for one's actions (good practice). Resolute honesty with oneself and others links them both together.

We continue to hear strong "political and *moral* calls" to diligently work together for sustainable development, planetary health, etc. Although the word "moral" is often used, it is usually mentioned only in passing. That's too bad. Because I think that health and development at all levels of society, like integrity and accountability, are in fact contingent on our moral underpinnings. There can be no health/development without moral health/development.

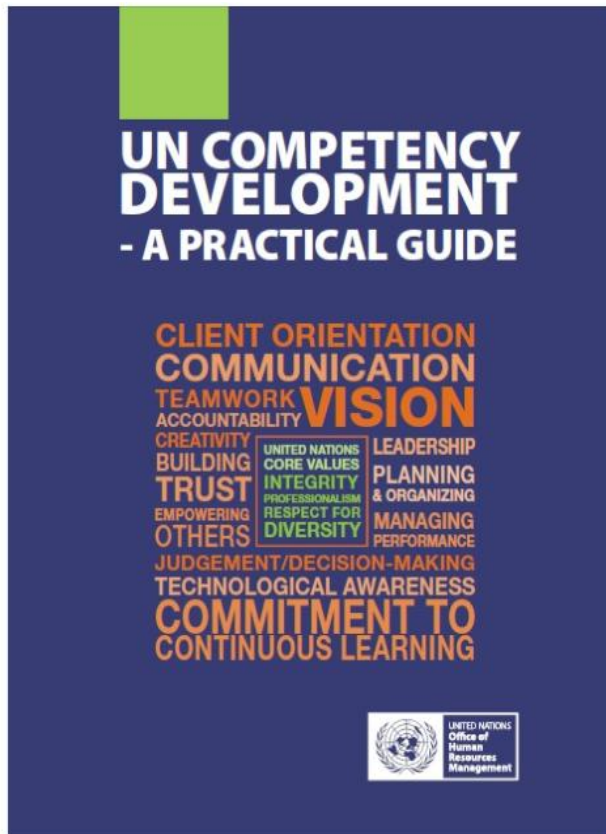
The UN has high expectations for its personnel—our personal and professional competencies, including moral competencies, matter. The *UN Core Competency Framework (2010)* outlined below, describes the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that all UN staff are expected to have and develop.

The *Framework* includes 17 competencies and is organized into three categories: Core Values, Core Competencies, and Core Managerial Competencies. Integrity is the first of the three Core Values and accountability is one of the eight Core Competencies. Here is a summary.

--**UN Core Values:** integrity, professionalism, and respect for diversity.

--**UN Core Competencies:** communication, team work, planning and organization, accountability, creativity, client orientation, commitment to continuous learning, and technological awareness.

--**UN Managerial Competencies:** leadership, vision, empowering others, building trust, managing performance and judgment, and decision-making.



“Integrity—Positive Indicators. Upholds the principles of the United Nations Charter. Demonstrates the values of the United Nations, including impartiality, fairness, honesty and truthfulness, in daily activities and behaviours. Acts without consideration of personal gain. Resists undue political pressure in decision-making. Does not abuse power or authority. Stands by decisions that are in the Organization’s interest even if they are unpopular. Takes prompt action in cases of unprofessional or unethical behaviour.” (p. 8)

“Accountability—Positive Indicators. Takes ownership for all responsibilities and honours commitments. Delivers outputs for which one has responsibility within prescribed time, cost and quality standards. Operates in compliance with organizational regulations and rules. Supports subordinates, provides oversight and takes responsibility for delegated assignments. Takes personal responsibility for his/her own shortcomings and those of the work unit, where applicable.” (p. 75)

Social Psychology for UN Staff

Cognitive dissonance is one of the most relevant social psychology concepts that can help us to understand our prevarication tendencies (i.e. evading or distorting the truth, lying) as we try to practice integrity and accountability well. It refers to the disturbing, internal incongruence that we feel as we try to harmonize discrepant thoughts about ourselves. Tavris and Aronson in *Mistakes Were Made But Not By Me* (2007) shed light on how these moral maneuvers help us feel good about ourselves.

Most people, when directly confronted by evidence that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action but justify it even more tenaciously. Even irrefutable evidence is rarely enough to pierce the mental armor of self-justification....That is why self-justification is more powerful and more dangerous than the explicit lie. It allows people to convince themselves that what they did was the best thing they could have done. (pp. 2, 4)

Now between the conscious lie to fool others and unconscious self-justification to fool ourselves lies a fascinating gray area, patrolled by that unreliable, self-serving historian—memory. Memories are often pruned and shaped by an ego-enhancing bias that blurs the edges of past events, softens culpability, and distorts what really happened...Over time, as the self-serving distortions of memory kick in and we forget or distort past events, we may come to believe our own lies, little by little. (p. 6)

Yet mindless self-justification, like quicksand, can draw us deeper into disaster. It blocks our ability to even see our errors, let alone correct them. It distorts reality, keeping us from getting all the information we need and assessing issues clearly. It prolongs and widens rifts between lovers, friends, and nations. It keeps us from letting go of unhealthy habits. It permits the guilty to avoid taking responsibility for their deeds. (p. 9-10)

Ten Tactics for Feigning Integrity and Avoiding Accountability

Here are 10 tactics used to feign integrity and avoid accountability for mistakes, poor practice, dysfunction, and outright deviance. I see such tactics often in my consulting work and as part of a network confronting a major international fraud. These tactics illustrate what *not* to do when we and our organizations are asked to give an account of our work. Understanding how we can get it wrong can be a helpful way to avoid some of these proven tactical tricks—but there is no guarantee!

1. Delegate the matter to someone else. Diffuse it, distance yourself. Avoid any internal or independent review. Overlook whistleblower and grievance policies.
2. Dodge, reword, or repackage, the issues. Obfuscate the facts, muddle the main issues, or at least talk tentatively or vaguely about some “mistakes in the past” that someone could have dealt with better. Disguise any culpability.
3. Focus on minor or “other” things so as to look like you are focusing on central things. Punctuate it all with the language of transparency and accountability.
4. Appeal to your “integrity” and to acting with the “highest standards,” without demonstrating either.
5. Point out your past track record. Highlight positive things that you are doing now. Remind everyone that you are doing your best.
6. Ask/assume that people should trust you without verification. Offer some general assurances that you are looking into the matter. All is OK.
7. State that you are being attacked, being treated unfairly, and that people don’t understand. Be sure to remind folks that life/leadership is hard and full of tough choices and ambiguities.
8. Mention other peoples’ (alleged) problems, question their motives and credibility—especially if they are noisome question-askers or whistleblowers.
9. Prop up pathology and the “old boys’ club” on behalf of the “greater good.” Hold out until the dust settles and the uncomfortable stuff goes away. If necessary sack staff but don’t change the system.
10. So in short, don’t really do anything with real integrity and accountability. Rather, maintain your self-interests, lifestyle, affiliations, and allusions of moral congruity, even if it means recalibrating your conscience. Cognitive dissonance applies to others but not to you.

Moral wholeness for a more *whole* world starts with ourselves. Integrity and accountability are key. And the UN *Core Competency Framework*—and social psychology research—point us in the right direction as we navigate the internal and external challenges that are part of our UN work. Part two of this article will look at five strategies for developing integrity and accountability.



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Integrity and Accountability for UN Staff Part Two: Staying the Course

Part two of this article continues the focus on two UN core competencies: integrity and accountability. I reflect on how social psychology can help us understand self-justification and self-deception. I also describe five strategies to develop the integrity and accountability needed to openly address cognitive dissonance and the myriad of internal and external challenges in UN work.

Kelly O'Donnell



Seeing is believing.

Illustration: courtesy Marc Rosenthal (<http://www.marc-roenthal.com>)

As both a psychologist and a UN representative for the World Federation for Mental Health, I am very interested in understanding the qualities needed to work effectively in the UN and other sectors. The UN has high expectations for its personnel. And rightly so—our personal and professional competencies, including moral competencies, matter. The *UN Core Competency Framework: A Practical Guide* (2010) describes the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that all UN staff are expected to have and to develop further. The *Framework* includes 17 competencies and is organized into three categories: Core Values, Core Competencies, and Core Managerial Competencies. Integrity is the first of the three Core Values and accountability is one of the eight Core Competencies.

At the core of integrity is the commitment to live consistently with one's values (moral goodness). At the core of accountability is the commitment to take responsibility for one's actions (good practice). Resolute honesty with oneself and others links them both together. Both are inseparable competencies that help maintain a moral course in UN work. There is no health/development without *moral* health/development.

As I highlighted in part one, **cognitive dissonance** is one of the most relevant concepts from social psychology that can help us to understand our propensity for prevarication (i.e. evading or distorting the truth, lying). It refers to the disturbing, internal incongruence that we feel as we try to harmonize discrepant thoughts about ourselves.

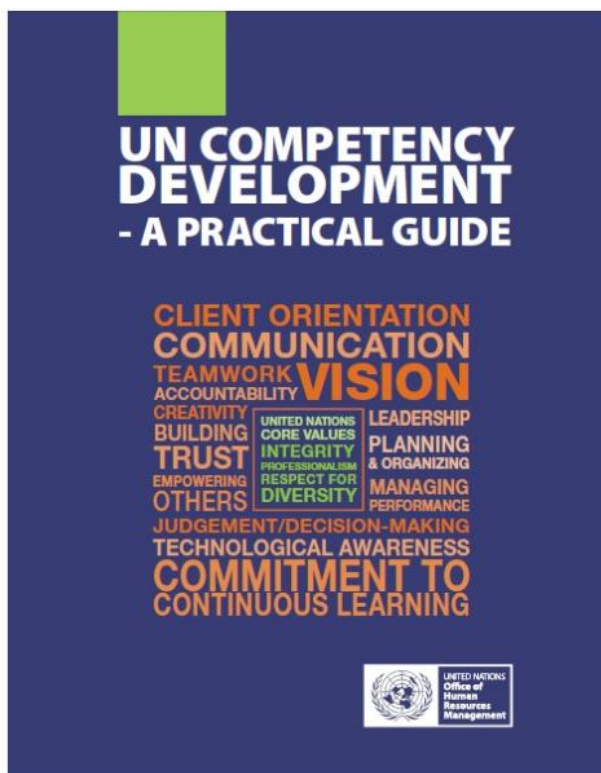
Tavris and Aronson in *Mistakes Were Made But Not By Me* (2007) describe cognitive dissonance, the inner disharmony between our ideal self and actual self, as follows: "When we make mistakes, we must calm the cognitive dissonance that jars our feelings of self-worth. And so we create fictions that absolve us of responsibility, restoring our belief that we are smart, moral, and right—a belief that is dumb, immoral, and wrong." (flyleaf)

Cognitive dissonance provides a useful grid to understand what we are up against when we try to act with integrity in bringing ourselves and our organizations to account. For example, what type of mental gymnastics can go on when assessing how we are putting into practice our ethical and good practice standards? Greater self-awareness is no guarantee of better practice, but it certainly can help! The description below from Tavris and Aronson sheds more light on managing our internal moral maneuvers.

Most people, when directly confronted by evidence that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action but justify it even more tenaciously. Even irrefutable evidence is rarely enough to pierce the mental armor of self-justification....It lets us sleep at night....And it keeps many professionals from changing outdated attitudes and procedures that can be harmful to the public. (pp. 2, 9-10)

..we can't wait around for people to have moral conversions, personality transplants, sudden changes of heart, and new insights that will cause them to sit up straight, admit error, and do the right thing. Most human beings and institutions are going to do everything in their power to reduce dissonance in ways that are favorable to them, that allows them to justify their mistakes, and maintain business as usual. (p. 223)

The ultimate correction...is more light...Once we understand how and when we need to reduce dissonance, we can become more vigilant about the process...By looking at our actions critically and dispassionately...we stand a chance of breaking out of the cycle....When you screw up, try saying this: "I made a mistake. I need to understand what went wrong. I don't want to make the same mistake again." (pp. 223, 225, 235)



Five Strategies: Integrity and Accountability

How can we bring out the best of who we are, in particular as it concerns staying the course with our integrity and accountability? Here are five suggested areas for developing these competencies and for navigating the illusory realm of cognitive dissonance. Also helpful is Albert Bandura's book, *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves* (2016) and the TedxTalk (2013) by Margaret Heffernan on *Willfull Blindness*.

1. Yourself. Examine your own integrity and accountability as you review this article. What strengths and weaknesses are you aware of? Give some examples of cognitive dissonance in your life. Going further: Review the rating scales for integrity and accountability in the *UN Competency Framework* for "Staff, Managers, and Managers of Managers" (pp. 12-14; 76-78) and the "Suggested Development Activities" (pp. 15-18; 79-82).

2. Colleagues. Discuss this topic/article with colleagues. To what extent are colleagues accountable with one another for their integrity? Identify some personal, group, organizational and sectoral vulnerabilities for prevarication as well as safeguards for ethical action. For example, as a group watch social psychologist Phil Zimbardo's classic TedTalk (2008) on *The Psychology of Evil*—what makes good people turn bad?

3. Managers. Explore how one's moral values are expressed and modeled in the work place as managers. It is especially important to detect how one's private morality may differ from one's workplace morality. Crisis times and peer pressure can be especially risky for compromising ones core values. See the short Introduction about this common and serious discrepancy in [Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers](#), (2010) by Robert Jackal. Also helpful is [Managing Executive Health](#) (2008, chapter nine on Ethical Character) by James Campbell Quick *et al.*

4. Leaders. Model and mentor integrity with transparency and accountability as leaders. Admit mistakes. Welcome feedback from others. Encourage colleagues to share “uncomfortable” information with you. Know, review, and refer to relevant good practice codes. As necessary, support the development of clear policies on whistleblower protection and non-retaliation. Chapter one in Bennis *et al.*'s book is very helpful for leadership integrity: [Transparency: How Leaders Create a Culture of Candor](#) (2008).

5. Ethos. Cultivate an organizational “culture of integrity” as encouraged by the [UN Global Compact](#): “By incorporating the Global Compact principles into strategies, policies and procedures, and establishing a culture of integrity, companies are not only upholding their basic responsibilities to people and planet, but also setting the stage for long-term success.” Actively foster “accountability at all levels” as per [Sustainable Development Goal 16](#): “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” Intentionally weave integrity and accountability into “how we do things” in our organization, department, and team thinking, strategies, polices, and procedures. Normalize it. Reward it. Organizational integrity and accountability are a collective mentality that shapes our work for better or worse. Like the other core competencies, they are inculcated throughout the life cycle of staff (from recruitment to end of service) and not just mentioned, for instance, as part of an orientation packet or during a crisis time.

Moral wholeness for a more *whole* world starts with ourselves. Integrity and accountability are key. The [UN Core Competency Framework](#), social psychology, and the five strategy areas above, point us in the right direction. They can help us stay the moral course in the face of the many internal and external challenges that are part of UN work.



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