

## If You Can't Stand the Heat...

### *A View of Integrity from an African Village*

by Wess Stafford



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Everything I really need to know to lead Compassion International, I learned from the poor in the West African village where I grew up. Chief among those lessons: the importance of integrity.

Compassion is proud to be one of the charter members of ECFA, and had a strong reputation for integrity long before I came to the ministry 34 years ago. We at Compassion firmly believe that if you lack integrity, you lack everything. If you can't be trusted, you have nothing to offer. The way I learned about integrity in the village of my childhood made a life-long impression on my soul and shaped my leadership principles.

I was raised by missionary parents among the Senufo tribe in the Ivory Coast. As far as I was concerned, I was as much a true son of our village as any of my little African friends. In fact, each night I would beg God to allow me to wake up the next morning with black skin so that I could be just like them. God never granted that request, but the village lovingly embraced me, anyway, as one of their own.

From these gentle people I learned about love, joy, hope, generosity and courage. I learned the meaning of and purpose for strength. And I learned about integrity. You might think that for people who possessed so little, integrity wouldn't matter so much.

But the truth is, the less they had, the greater was their gratitude and contentment, and the more respect they had for the meager belongings of their neighbors.

Down the dusty two-rut road lived a tribe with a radically different worldview and way of doing business. While we Senufo were hunters, fishermen and farmers, the tribe in the next village included craftsmen who specialized in making jewelry and statues of wood and stone. Every Wednesday was Market Day and people walked for hours in the blazing African sun to gather at a

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central location so they could sell and buy each others' goods. The craftsmen always arrived at market early so they could set up their stalls of wares in the shade of a grove of mango trees. Shade was a high premium because it provided a cooler place to sit, attracted customers, and most importantly, was the ideal setting for "shady deals." While the Senufo followed the principle of "integrity in everything," the "crafty" salesmen were more aligned with the philosophy of "There's a sucker born every minute."

You see, not all wooden carvings are created equal. The shriveling dry heat of half the year combined with the swelling humidity

of the other half would often cause a carved wooden elephant statue to crack and split. The artisans' solution involved cover-up and camouflage. They were adept at filling the cracks with wax, matching the color and grain of the wood by mixing the wax with shoe polish or dye made from flowers or trees. To the unsuspecting customer, the piece of art looked perfect. And of course, the shade of the tree aided in the deception. We boys watched and learned from our elders to examine the artwork carefully and then ask, in French (the colonial language the tribes had in common), "Est-ce sans cire?" We were literally asking, "Is this without wax?" Sincere? In other words, is it as good as it looks? Does it have hidden flaws? Are you being honest with me? Show me the wax!

These questions were always met with exaggerated indignation that their craftsmanship and their character had been insulted. But after the flurry of protests was over, our next question would be, "Then you would have no problem with me taking it out into the sunlight for a closer look?" Oh my, this they wanted to avoid at all costs, so bargains were offered in a hurry! In the bright tropical sunlight and the sweltering 120-degree heat, strange things happened to seemingly beautiful works of art that were not "sincere." The heat slowly melted the wax and the light exposed not only the smallest flaws, but the sellers' lack of integrity as well. John 3:19-20 comes to mind: "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of the light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil

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hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”

We live in an information-saturated era in which anything can be researched, scrutinized, hacked or shared. Camera phones and social media sites have become our modern-day “cloud of witnesses.” As many a fallen public figure has discovered, it’s much more difficult now to keep a dishonorable private life from tarnishing a polished public image. Integrity doesn’t require perfection, but it does require consistent sincerity, that we are honest about who we really are and what we really do. How sad that the virtue of sincerity is so often faked in this age of greed and cynicism, and that the news is filled with the tragic ramifications of corruption in leadership. Who and what can we believe? Consider those on Wall

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Street or in Washington who insist that their only agenda is to put the interests of their constituencies first—wouldn’t you like to take them out into the bright light and have a closer look? Apply some heat to test their true character, their sincerity, to see which one’s facade melts from the scrutiny and drips with deception?

More than ever, donors and customers are astute and discerning. Their giving and purchasing decisions are no longer solely based on their response to marketing presentations. They are “outcome driven,” wanting to invest their resources only where there is a proven track record of

success. They want to hear from experienced users via online reviews. Everything can be brought into the light and heat of intense examination, and word can travel fast and far if your prod-

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uct or service lives up to its advertising—and especially if it doesn’t.

Donors honor, even demand, accountability and transparency. Their bottom line is: If I look carefully, will I find out that you really are who you say you are? Are you really making the difference you claim? Are you delivering what you promise? Does what you do with my money actually work? Show me!

In the language of my boyhood village marketplace—“Are you without wax? Are you sincere?” We are now a global village marketplace, and it doesn’t matter who we are, what we lead or what we are trying to accomplish in this world, integrity will always be what matters most.

*Wess Stafford is president and CEO of Compassion International, Colorado Springs, CO—an accredited ECFA member.*

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