Authenticity and Self-transcendence

Most people would say that they have integrity in what they do, or in who they are in regards to being ethical and honest. To be authentic is to be true to one’s self so you could say that integrity is the fruit of being authentic. In Gene Ahner’s book, *Business Ethics* he discusses the idea of integrity and authenticity and what that means to us. Ahner asks what exactly do we mean by integrity or authenticity. He refers to authenticity as the wholeness of the person, the totality of character, to the unity of the self. When trying to describe authentic we have to look at how ethics fits into the definition. We know that integrity is not an ethics of compliance where someone is just following the rules. This is because being compliant is not coming from within one’s true self. To look at what it means to be authentic we need to look at what it means to have an ethics of achievement, to go beyond ourselves. Ahner describes this moving beyond the present moment as an innate dynamic to the human spirit.

Authenticity may not look the same in every person and so may be hard to describe because it comes from within. Sometimes it is easier to see what it is not because it can’t be described as easily as say, a virtue. As Ahner describes, a person’s morals lie at the heart of who he is. He goes on to describe what a moral person is not to get to the center of authenticity. To help sift out what a moral person is he describes what a moral person is not. The author states, “Unfortunately, the person who is always after the pursuit of achieving the ‘ideal self’ will be set up for a lifetime of excuses, blame, and nonperformance. The best one can do (the most moral!) is ‘to give up being perfect or ideal and, instead, embrace ownership of the results, go through the pain to improve, and enjoy the benefits.’ (P.86) He continues his litany of what a moral
person is not by describing that a moral person is no just nice, principled, spontaneous, altruistic, and is more than just being human. After getting a better understanding of what a moral person is the author suggests the use of the terms “integrity’ and “authenticity” as to what makes a moral person, and authenticity may very well be the most important of these characteristics.

If we have in innate dynamic that moves use beyond the present moment and gives us the momentum to achieve greater things, then what do we need to achieve to become truly authentic people? According to Ahner, ”A person or a business becomes moral not by ‘not doing things’ but by doing things rightly. An ethics of achievement call out the best in use; have courage, be creative, find a way. This dynamic of the human spirit engages us fundamentally in four different types of operations that ground four basic moral imperatives. Each operation has distinctive and normative characteristics that must be examined in detail if we are going to stay true to our dynamic.” When we look at these moral imperatives they almost seem to be just common sense.

The first imperative is to be attentive. Sounds easy enough, but to pay attention we must be open minded and be open to what is going on around us. How can anyone run a good business without paying attention to what is going on, and what people are saying to you. I recently had a situation at work when I was told to gather information on the subject of emergency preparation. I followed some leads and found a community leader in the area that had similar ideas. I put together a meeting for all to meet and discuss the idea and was immediately slapped down for doing what I was told to do. The community leader sent a note to upper management in hopes of putting together the event and had mentioned that the mayor of the city was also interested in our event. Unfortunately after this information passed through a few people it changed. I later heard people were asking why did I go over everyone’s head and ask the mayor of the city to
come to our school. Rather than speak directly to me (data), they chose to listen to gossip. I was removed from the project, all of my work was taken over by my manager, the event was a success, and she got the kudos. This to me suggests that integrity is not here in the workplace.

Our next imperative is to be intelligent. In order to make sense of the data we must ask questions so that we can figure out how do all the pieces fit together; this requires intelligent communication. As Ahner states, “Only by following the further questions for understanding can the situation be met adequately, whether that be a business problem or a personal choice.” The more knowledgeable you have the more aware you are to what is going on around you.

Be reasonable and judge soundly is the third moral imperative. In order to make good decisions in business or life we assess what is really going on and not pre-judge or take others word. In the book Business Ethics the author states “Others can present data and offer explanations, but only the individual can make the judgment for herself. Precisely because judgment is so personal, it is the critical step of genuine morality.” In regards to the work scenario given perhaps there may have been a time when those questioning my decisions could have contacted me before passing judgment. This is me would be a sign of integrity.

The last imperative is to be responsible. Once we have allowed ourselves to be open minded on an issue, collected the data, and make a sound judgment we need to decide what action we are going to take. Ahner would say it is what we consider important that moves us to action. This whole movement is the overcoming of our limits; self transcending, if you will. This is when we realize that we are making ourselves the person we become by the choices we make.