Integrity: Without It Nothing Works
Michael Jensen: Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School and a senior advisor at The Monitor Group. This interview is based on his paper, “Integrity: A Positive Model that Incorporates the Normative Phenomena of Morality, Ethics and Legality”, co-written with Werner Erhard and Steve Zaffron.

There is some confusion between the terms integrity, morality and ethics. How do you differentiate them?
These three phenomena are widely understood to provide standards of ‘correct’ behaviour, but people generally get them mixed up. The primary differentiation I make between them is to distinguish integrity from morality and ethics. Integrity is a purely positive proposition. It has nothing to do with good vs.bad. Think for a moment about the Law of Gravity: there is no such thing as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ gravity; like integrity, it just ‘is’. Morality and ethics, on the other hand, are normative concepts in that they deal with matters of good or bad, right vs. wrong. Morality refers to a society’s standards of right and wrong behavior for individuals and groups within that society, while ethics refers to the normative set of values that apply to all members of a group or organization. Thus, both morality and ethics relate to desirable vs. undesirable behaviour.

You define integrity as “what it takes for a person to be whole and complete.” What does this look like in daily life?
An individual is whole and complete when their word is whole and complete, and their word is whole and complete when they honour their word. We can honour our word in one of two ways: first, by keeping our word, and on time as promised; or second, as soon as we know that we won’t keep our word, we inform all parties involved and clean up any mess that we’ve caused in their lives. When we do this, we are honouring our word despite having not kept it, and we have maintained our integrity.

If you are serious about being a person of integrity, you will think very carefully before giving your word to anyone or any- thing, and you will never give your word to two or more things that are mutually inconsistent. As they should, many people focus on the importance of keeping their word; however, if one does not consider how to maintain integrity when one cannot keep one’s word, this is sure to lead to out-of-integrity behaviour at some point. If you’re up to anything important in life, you will not always be able to keep your word, and that’s alright, but if you are a person of integrity, you will always honour your word.

Integrity is important to individuals, groups, organizations and society because it creates workability. Without integrity, the workability of any object, system, person, group or organization declines; and as workability declines, the opportunity for performance declines. Therefore, integrity is a necessary condition for maximum performance. As an added benefit, honouring one’s word is also an actionable pathway to being trusted by others.