LAP

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Make the Honor Role

Acting Responsibly

Objectives:

A Explain the importance of acting responsibly.

B Exhibit responsible behavior.

MBA *Research* & Curriculum Center

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What Is Responsible Behavior?

It sounds like something your grandma might call you—"such a responsible young person." Kind of corny, sort of annoying, but still—doesn't it feel good to have people (even your grandma) think of you as someone who does what you say you will do, when you say you will do it?

Responsible behavior is doing the right thing. It is doing what people expect you to do, even when it's not easy, fun, or clear. Responsible people can be counted on to do what they say they're going to do, even in tough situations. For society to work, people have to behave in responsible, predictable, and ethical ways. Trust is essential, and being responsible means being someone other people can trust. It means knowing the right thing to do and then doing it. So it makes sense to figure out just what responsible behavior looks like in many different situations and how you can cultivate it to become the kind of person others—and you—can count on.

Consider the consequences

Your mom wants you to clean your room. Your teacher wants you to do your homework. And your boss wants you to get to work on time. Everybody is on your case to do the right thing, to do what you say you will, to be, in a word, responsible. But there's more to being responsible than just doing what other people want you to do. Being responsible means making the right choices. It means identifying and accepting the consequences—good or bad—of your decisions. Ultimately, it means considering how your actions will affect the people and situations around you.

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The recipe for responsibility

Responsible behavior is made up of five essential elements—honesty, compassion/respect, fairness, accountability, and courage. Let's take a look at each one.

Honesty

The old saying is true—**honesty** really is the best policy. Even if you're able to get away with lying for a little while, your lies are bound to catch up with you at some point. So here's a good guideline to live by—tell the truth, and tell it with respect for the people who hear it.

Keep in mind that honest people don't mess with other people's belongings. They don't steal or break things. And if they do break something, they admit it and try to make amends.

Honest people make decisions about people and things based on evidence rather than emotions. Sometimes, it's easy to make judgments based on what we *think* we know. But being honest means being willing to consider *all* the facts before we draw those conclusions. As humans, our perspectives can sometimes be skewed. When we're being honest, we're willing to consider alternative explanations.

Finally, honesty means being willing to consider that there are aspects of ourselves we need to change. It's dishonest, both to ourselves and to others, to think we're perfect. Everyone has room for improvement. Being honest with ourselves means being open to constructive criticism.

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For more on the relationship between honesty and the workplace, read Laura Brinkman's article "The Importance of Honesty in the Workplace" at http://www.klemchuk.com/the-importance-of-honesty-in-the-workplace/.

Compassion/Respect

No one likes to be treated with disrespect. We all want to be understood, accepted, and appreciated. We expect to be treated with kindness and **compassion** (concern, sympathy). We expect other people to try to understand us, not just criticize us.

If you want to be respected, you have to **respect** others. You must treat people with kindness and try to put yourself in their shoes. When someone needs help, be helpful! You never know when you're going to need someone to help you someday.

One of the most important things to remember about respecting others is to not judge people who are different from you. Everywhere you look, you see people of different ethnicities, economic status, genders, political beliefs, religious backgrounds, sexual orientations, etc. Everyone's different, and there's no such thing as normal. So there's no reason to draw distinctions between people. Everyone is unique and deserves to be treated with kindness and respect.

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▲ *We all come from different places, backgrounds, and experiences. Learning compassion and respect for others will help you throughout your career and personal life.*

Fairness

Let's face it: we've all felt that we were being treated unfairly at some time or another. We don't like to feel we're being cheated out of what's rightfully ours. In our society, we put a high value on our rights and on making sure no one takes them away. We believe there are certain things everyone deserves, and if there's injustice somewhere, it has to be fixed.

Fairness can be tricky. It doesn't mean that we always get what we want. In truth, no one gets their way all the time. Being fair really means balancing your personal needs with the needs of others. It means making sure one person doesn't always win out over the other. It means not always seeking your own way at the expense of others.

Fairness is a lot like respect. It means that we treat everyone the way we want to be treated, without **partiality** or **bias**. It means that we tolerate people who think, look, or act differently than we do. It means that we don't show favoritism or give one group special privileges at the expense of another.
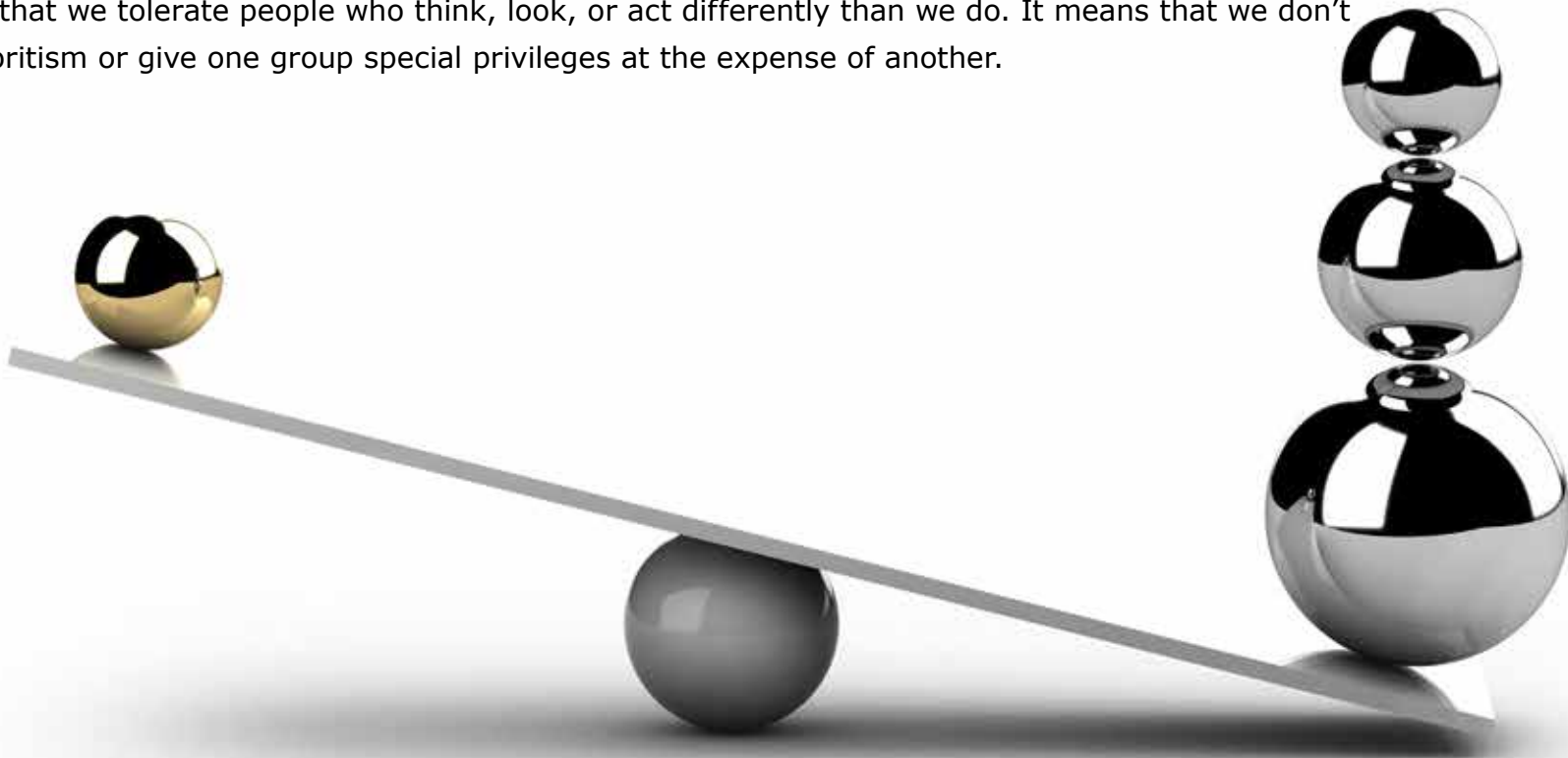
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Accountability

Suppose you haven't cleaned your work area, even though your supervisor's been bugging you about it all day. What do you think will happen when s/he checks on you again and sees that you haven't done what s/he asked? Are you going to whine and make excuses, or are you going to own up and face whatever consequence might come?

That's what **accountability** is all about. It's acknowledging and accepting whatever happens as a result of your decisions, actions, and mistakes. Blaming other people for things you did wrong is both dishonest and unkind. Don't try to make excuses—they don't make anything better. The more excuses you make for bad behavior, the less likely people are to trust what you say in the future. So do what you say and say what you did. It's better for everyone in the long run.

Being accountable means thinking about what might happen as a result of your action and deciding if you still want to do it. You know that if you're late for work one more time, your manager will put a written warning in your personnel file. Is it worth it? Think about how your decisions will influence other people's decisions. Decide if it's worth it. Then, if it blows up in your face, accept the consequences, learn from your mistake, and try not to make it again.

► *Hiding from your responsibilities will catch up to you! Being accountable for your own actions and performance will keep you on top of your game, and also make you a more valuable employee and friend.*


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Finally, accountability means doing what you say you will do. If you tell a customer that you'll meet with him at 3:30, meet with him at 3:30. If you say you'll have your part of a project completed by Tuesday morning, have it done by Tuesday morning. Never make promises you don't intend to keep. If you are someone other people can depend on, they will be more likely to keep their promises to you.

◄ *If you say it, then do it! Keeping your promises and being on time for your obligations will take you far in the business world.*

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You can learn more about cultivating personal accountability by reading "Developing Personal Accountability: Taking Responsibility to Get Ahead" at https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/developing-personal-accountability.htm.
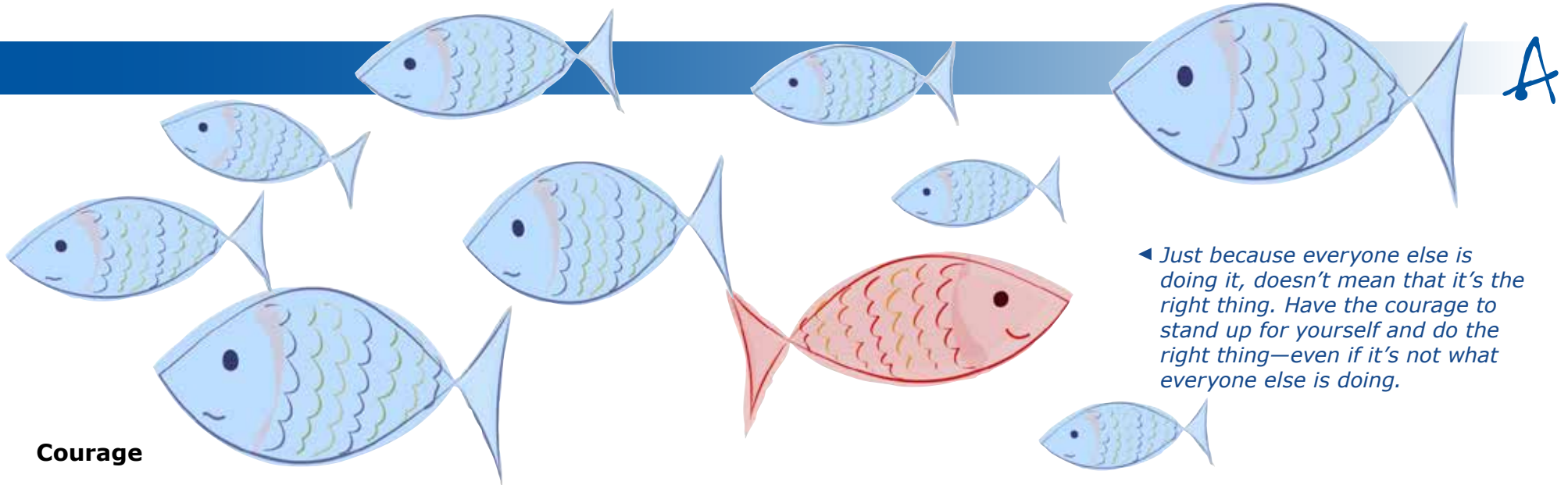
◄ Just because everyone else is doing it, doesn't mean that it's the right thing. Have the courage to stand up for yourself and do the right thing—even if it's not what everyone else is doing.

Courage

To do the right thing even when it's not easy, fun, or popular takes a lot of **courage**. If everyone tells you to do one thing, and you know that it's wrong or unwise, you have to be brave enough to stand up for what you believe. Sometimes it's extremely difficult to do that. Many people find it a lot easier to just go with the crowd, even when the crowd is acting in a way that doesn't mesh with their personal values.

Responsible behavior means always being true to what you believe is right. When you waver on your own values, you lose credibility with both yourself and others. The more you stick to what you know is right, the easier it gets. You'll find it easier to trust yourself to make the right decisions. And people who trust themselves are people who can be trusted by others to make the right call.

Another thing that takes courage is standing up to people when you see them doing something wrong or harmful. We've all heard about people who get beaten up while a crowd of onlookers stands by and does nothing. How does this happen? It happens because people are afraid to confront each other, even when they know it's the right thing to do. It takes courage to tell your coworkers that socializing, rather than doing their share of the work, is wrong. It takes even more courage to make sure they don't get away with it.
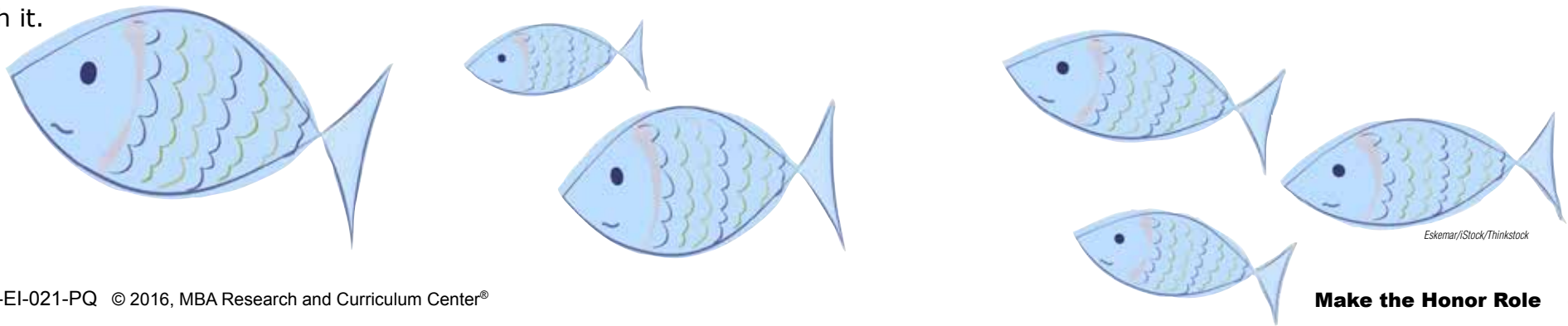
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To act or not to act: That is the question

Even when you know what it means to act responsibly, it isn't always clear what the right thing to do is. Sometimes, it's complicated and confusing. When your personal values—loyalty and honesty, for example—come into conflict, there may not be just one right way to go. And sometimes, even when it's clear what you should do, the choice to do the right thing may be really hard. Let's look at some work situations where acting responsibly might prove challenging.

Too-fast food

You just started working at the Wendy's near your house. It's not too bad—your boss is cool, you get liberal meal benefits, and you can choose your own schedule. Lately, your friend has been hanging out a lot while you're working. One day when your boss isn't there, he starts hinting around that you should give him some free fries or a cheeseburger. You really like your friend, and you don't want to be a jerk, but is it responsible to give him the food?

A change would do you good

You sell video games, hardware, and accessories at the local GameStop. A customer is purchasing several used games that total $71.52. The customer pays for his items with a $100 bill, and you give him $23.48 in change. Just after the customer leaves the store, you discover that you shortchanged him by five dollars. Should you run after the customer to give him the money you owe him—or should you not bother, since he is already heading for the parking lot?

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All in a day's work

You work as an office assistant for a busy downtown law office. Your coworker, Danielle, puts in long hours, sometimes even going in on the weekends. One day, you catch Danielle taking home office supplies—pens, paper, a stapler. She tells you that no one at work will even notice they're missing. "It's just office supplies," she says. "People do it all the time." Danielle feels that she deserves a few perks because of how hard she works, but what do you think—should she have to buy her own supplies?

Guiding light

Responsible behavior is all about gaining control of your own life. If you know the right thing to do and you do it, no one has to look over your shoulder. You're able to take care of yourself and of those around you. You're able to do good things that have a positive impact. That's what people mean when they talk about personal and social responsibility.

Personal responsibility

People who take responsibility for themselves, their behavior, and the consequences of their behavior have a high degree of **personal responsibility**. They have a clearly defined set of ethics, or moral principles, that guide what they do and how they do it. These ethics help them make decisions even in complicated situations. People with personal responsibility show compassion,

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fairness, accountability, and courage. Being true to your ethics means being true to yourself. It helps you develop and maintain self-respect, self-worth, and self-control. Sticking to your values and always trying to do the right thing means that no one can trick or manipulate you. Take a look at some of the thoughts and reflections on personal responsibility here—https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/developing-personal-accountability.htm—and choose a few of your favorites!

Social responsibility

Taking the characteristics of personal responsibility and expanding them to include consideration of your employer, coworkers, customers, and community is what **social responsibility** is all about. For society to function smoothly and effectively, people have to be able to trust each other. We have to trust that people are going to do their jobs, for instance, and that no one's going to steal or break company property. People need to respect and value one another enough to honor each other's rights and dignity. Social responsibility means taking other people's needs, interests, and feelings into account and acting accordingly. It means not doing something to deliberately hurt or mislead others. It doesn't mean that we always have to give up what we want so that other people can be happy. But it does mean that we make an effort to get along with others. Society functions through a common set of ethical values and behaviors that influence our ability to judge right from wrong. Acting within those accepted rules and seeking to contribute to the common good demonstrate social responsibility.

Summary

Being responsible means a lot more than just doing what others tell you to do. It means taking a stand for what you believe in. It means doing the right thing, even when the right thing is hard or unpopular. It means respecting other people and yourself enough to be honest, fair, compassionate, and courageous. Having a good system of personal ethics in place will help you make responsible decisions and stick to them. It doesn't mean that you'll be perfect or always know what to do. But it does mean that you'll have less difficulty figuring out what to do when you're in challenging situations. It's not always easy to be responsible, but it's always honorable to try.

TOTAL RECALL

1. What are the five essential elements of responsibility?

2. What is personal responsibility?

3. What is social responsibility?

THE GRAY ZONE

During the "War on Terror" in the 2000s, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and American armed forces questioned hundreds of suspected terrorists. Some detainees were subjected to extreme interrogation techniques, including sleep deprivation, exposure to freezing temperatures, and waterboarding, which simulates drowning.

Although many civilians and members of the U.S. government loudly denounced these methods, the CIA and military justified their actions. High-ranking officials explained that harsh interrogation methods often yield valuable information from prisoners who otherwise would not answer questions. Lower ranking individuals, on the other hand, said that they were simply following their commanding officers' orders.

One of the hallmarks of responsible behavior is doing what others expect you to do. However, behaving responsibly also includes standing up for what you believe to be right and treating other people with dignity. If the interrogators really were ordered to treat their prisoners harshly, were they right to follow those orders? What would you do in this situation?

Putting It All Together

There are many different ways to show that you've got what it takes to act responsibly. Part of being responsible means knowing how to act in different situations and contexts. The way you act at home, for instance, is different from how you act at school or on the job. No matter where you are, there's a right and a wrong way to behave.

Follow the rules

Everywhere you go, there are rules about what and what not to do. At home, for example, a rule could be that your homework must be done by 9:00 p.m. At school, you must have a hall pass to go to the restroom. At work, you're supposed to be on the job by 8:30 every morning. Even though rules are sometimes a pain, they help society run smoothly because they let everyone know what to expect and what will happen if they break those rules. Acting responsibly means doing your best to know what the rules are and doing what you're supposed to do.

► *Arriving on time shows that you are a team player and committed to the needs of the organization. And that's an important trait to employers.*
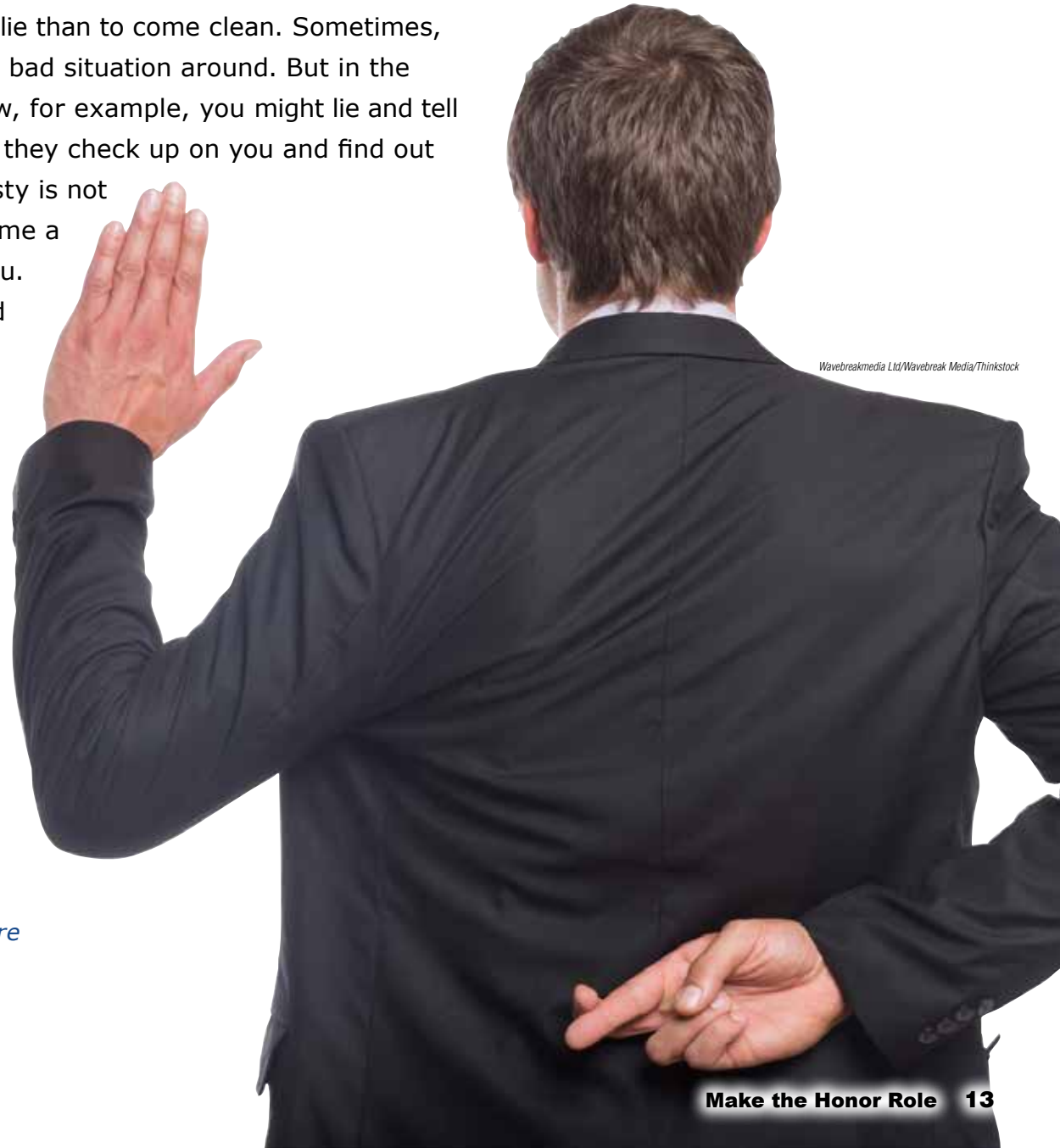
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Tell the truth

No doubt about it, sometimes it's a lot easier to tell a lie than to come clean. Sometimes, it seems like lying can get us out of trouble or turn a bad situation around. But in the long run, it never pays to lie. If you miss your curfew, for example, you might lie and tell your parents you were somewhere you weren't. But if they check up on you and find out you're lying, you'll be in even more trouble. Dishonesty is not a character trait anyone should cultivate. It can become a nasty habit that makes it hard for anyone to trust you. When you get caught in a lie, you lose credibility, and people stop taking you seriously.

At work, people expect you to be upfront and honest about what you're doing. No one likes a slacker who tries to convince others that s/he's really working hard. If you're bored, overwhelmed, frustrated, or confused, communicate openly and honestly. Telling the truth builds trust between you, your boss, and your coworkers.

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▶ *Honesty is one of the most important characteristics that employers look for. Sometimes, the hardest truths to tell are the ones that need told.*

Admit your mistakes

No one's perfect. Being responsible doesn't mean that you never make a mistake. But it does mean that you are willing to acknowledge when you mess up. It means that you accept the consequences and try to do better.

Maybe you totally dropped the ball on a work project and didn't get your part done on time. It happens from time to time. But when it does, responsible people admit they made a mistake and make every effort not to do it again.

Or maybe you gave a customer the wrong order. The responsible thing to do is to admit it. Don't beat yourself up about it; just realize that you made a mistake. If you're allowed, offer the customer a discount. It might make your boss unhappy, but he will recognize that you are a responsible person and a good employee.

▶ *Everyone makes mistakes, but taking responsibility for your mistakes can help you stand out and show that you care more about the organization than your ego.*

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Finish tasks with care and on time

Trust
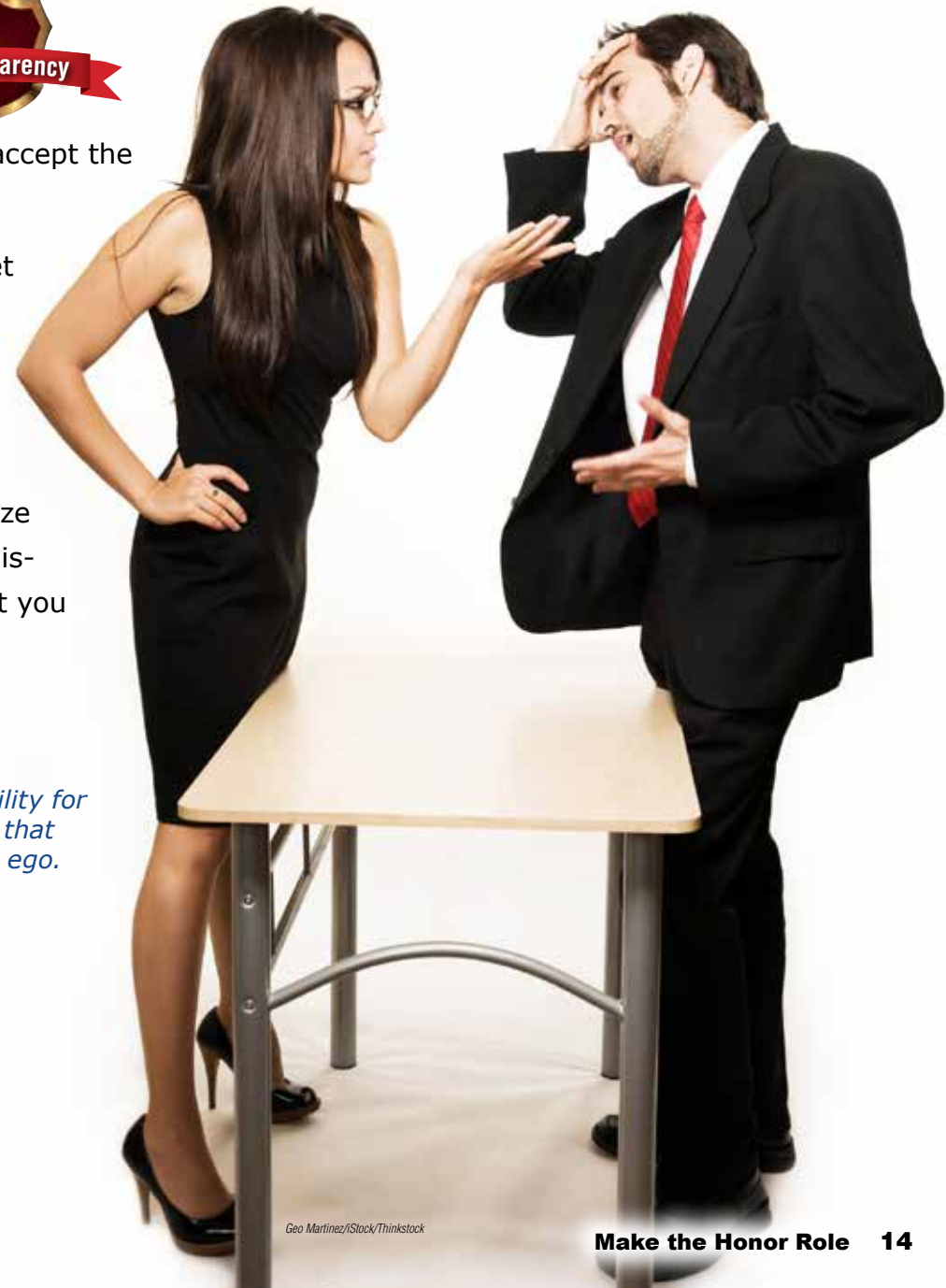
If your mom asks you to clean your room, don't just throw all your junk under the bed. If you have to walk the dog, make sure he really gets some exercise instead of just letting him run around the yard for a few minutes. If you're going out with a friend, make sure your parents know where you are and when you'll be back. Then, be where you say you're going to be, and come back when you say you will. If you prove yourself trustworthy, people will be more likely to trust you in the future.

Learning how to finish tasks on time and with care can also make you a good employee. Wherever you work, you will have duties people expect you to perform, and they will expect you to perform them well. Being successful on the job requires living up to a set of expectations and contributing to the shared goal of the organization.

► *Take pride in your work and responsibility for your actions. Not only will this build trust with others, but it will also leave you feeling accomplished with your work.*

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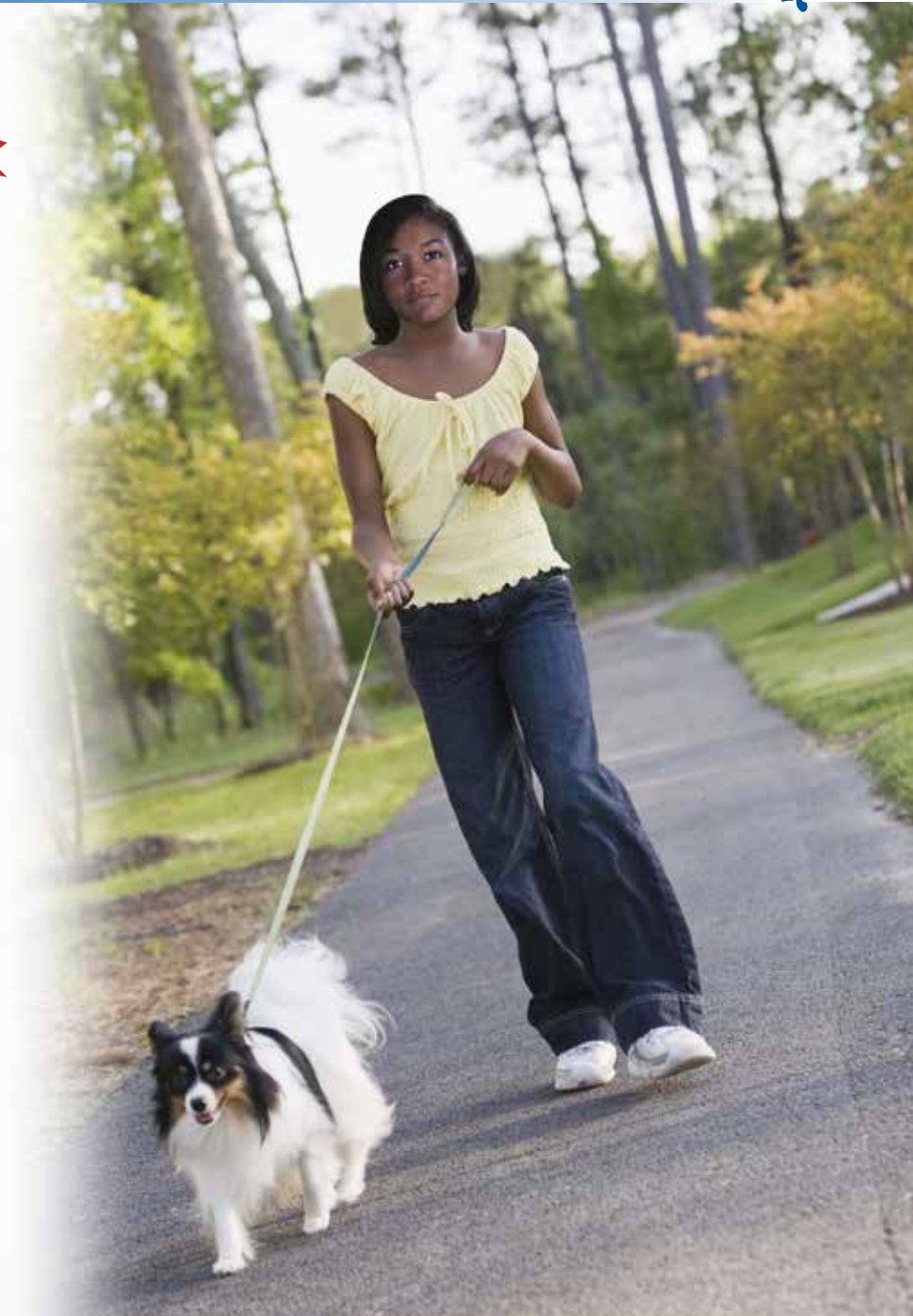
Always act appropriately

Regardless of where you are, your interactions should be respectful and kind. Sometimes coworkers, customers, and even managers can get on your nerves. It's part of human nature to get annoyed with others. Regardless, you should always treat the people around you the way you would want them to treat you—with dignity, care, and respect.

Appropriate behavior at work also means doing what you're supposed to be doing when you're supposed to be doing it. It means not talking to a friend on the phone while customers are waiting to be helped. It means not surfing the Web, checking email, or texting your buddies when you're supposed to be working on a research project for your next meeting. Save that stuff for your break—after all, that's what breaks are for!

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To learn more about developing responsibility as you begin a career, see:

http://www.career-success-for-newbies.com/being-responsible.html.

Summary

No one does the right thing all the time. Sometimes it's really hard to do the responsible thing. It's okay to make mistakes. Striving to be a person other people can count on is a worthy goal. Being true to yourself makes you someone others can respect and admire. Admitting when you're wrong and learning from your mistakes help you grow as a person. No one expects you to do the right thing all the time or even to always know what the right thing is. The point is to try to live your life with integrity and common sense.

TOTAL RECALL

1. Briefly describe the following ways to demonstrate responsible behavior:

   a. Follow the rules.

   b. Tell the truth.

   c. Admit your mistakes.

   d. Finish tasks with care and on time.

   e. Always act appropriately.