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MBS ([00:02](#)):

So before I introduce Rob formally, I'll just make this statement. I've done a bunch of work in the world of organizational development in my time in change management, and some of that's been helping big companies set up visions and missions and values in particular. And honestly, most of the time that work has driven me nuts because it has felt like I'm creating wallpaper. You may have heard of the phrase, "Death by lamination." That's what I see happening to lots of corporate values. They come up with a list of bland values, they stick some lamination on it, they stick it on a wall, and they go, "Well, hopefully that will shift the culture around here."

([00:39](#)):

And one of the greatest farces in the world of value statement is when people go, "Integrity." As if they won't have integrity unless they declare it explicitly as a banal corporate value. And what I'm really excited about talking to Rob Chesnut



about is his brand new book. Now Rob is the author of *Intentional Integrity: How Smart Companies Can Lead An Ethical Revolution*. So I'm really excited to dig in to understand just what it takes to actively, intentionally, in a smart way, make ethics and integrity part of an organizational culture. So Rob, welcome.

Rob ([01:18](#)):

Michael, thanks for having me.

MBS ([01:21](#)):

Were you a general counsel first and then chief ethics officer or do you start as chief ethics officer and become general counsel? Which is the chicken, which is the egg?

Rob ([01:30](#)):

The lawyer was first. I was a lawyer for 35 years. Started as a federal prosecutor and then became a general counsel in Silicon Valley. But then just got fascinated with the idea of integrity in companies.

MBS ([01:45](#)):

Got it. And what gets in the way of companies being ethical?

Rob ([01:51](#)):

A few things. One is a focus on shareholders and hitting a financial number. When you put a number up on the wall and an executive walks around and says, "We are going to hit this number no matter what.", that gives people, I think, permission or even fear of losing their job if they don't do it and they end up with a Volkswagen emission scandal.

MBS ([02:17](#)):

Right.



Rob ([02:17](#)):

Or Novartis with their recent troubles, or even eBay.

MBS ([02:23](#)):

Yeah, I heard the phrase, "What can be measured can be manipulated." And as soon as you set that target, people go, "Well, I'll crawl over dead people if I have to hit that target if it means status and it means bonus and it means all those other things."

Rob ([02:38](#)):

Yeah, I tell you another thing that does though is just silence. I did talking to some scientists as part of doing the book and people will always fudge if they feel like it's in their interest. And they will particularly be willing to fudge when there's silence on matters of integrity or ethics. So ambiguity and silence create this environment that's really a fertile ground for integrity problems. So if you want to drive a culture of integrity into your company, one of the best things you can do is talk about integrity. Because integrity is contagious.

MBS ([03:15](#)):

I love that. Integrity is contagious. That's a great phrase. How do you help people to have the courage to not be silent? I've heard of something, I think it's called the bystander issue, which is people are bystanders and then somebody acts and then everybody acts. But it takes that first person to often start the movement that creates something that matters. And it's hard to be a whistleblower, it's hard to not stand by and be silent. I'm curious to know how at Airbnb and in other places you've cultivated a courage to not be silent.

Rob ([03:52](#)):

Well, you need leaders to model the behavior. And that was something we specifically talked about. You have to encourage people to speak up because



there's a natural reluctance to, quote-unquote, "cause trouble" or do something that might interfere with your career.

[\(04:07\)](#):

I'll tell you a story, Michael. There was a guy came over to me one day , we had these standing desks, which I think are very common now, common work areas, shared spaces. And I had walked to the restroom, came back to my computer, and an IT guy came over to me and said, "Hey Rob, I noticed when you left your desk, you left your computer open. You didn't close your computer down." And I thought about it for a minute and he was right. And I had done it. It was only a few minutes. And of course the natural reaction is, "What are you talking about? We're in a locked, secure building. It was only for a couple minutes." But I realized that what this guy had done, this middle manager, took a lot of courage to walk over to a senior exec and point out to a senior exec that they did something wrong was to me a very courageous act.

[NEW\_PARAGRAPH] So instead of pushing back on him, I thanked him, told him he was absolutely right. He helped me create a single button on my laptop that makes it easy to walk away and lock. And then what I did at the next opportunity, there was a fairly large group of employees and he was in the audience, I gave him what we call an Integri-Yeti. These are these Yeti water bottles that have our Integrity markings and logo on there.

MBS [\(05:25\)](#):

Nice.

Rob [\(05:26\)](#):

And I had a minute telling everybody the story and gave him the Yeti in front of everybody. Two years later, I get an email from him. He told me that in his six years at Airbnb, that was his most meaningful moment, being recognized in front of his peers for doing that. A \$30 water bottle. So just as a leader, if you're



willing to reward people, encourage people to speak up, it can change the entire culture.

MBS ([05:55](#)):

I love that. Well, thanks for sharing that story. I'm wondering if you'll jump us into your book. It's brand new. I'm excited to hear about it. Will you read a couple of pages to us?

Rob ([06:08](#)):

Sometimes it's simply about being treated as a human being. Much has been written about the fact that Black guests have reported having a tougher time getting a reservation on Airbnb. It's a sad truth that racism exists on the Airbnb platform, as it does all over the world. Despite the fact that every user on Airbnb is required to pledge that they will accept all regardless of their race, sex, gender, et cetera, not everyone lives up to that pledge. We believe that failure is often the result of unconscious bias. The fact that some hosts are more comfortable with guests that are like themselves. Whether the bias is intentional or unconscious, it's wrong. And stories about cases of unacceptable treatment have surfaced in the media.

([07:03](#)):

Inside the company, some of our employees were shocked to read about discrimination occurring on the platform. For many of them living in a city like San Francisco, that is generally very accepting of different cultures and lifestyles, discrimination was something they had only read about in history books. But if they spoke to some of our African American employees, they'd learn about how discrimination is ongoing in their lives, including at home in San Francisco. One African American employee told me about the many times he had been pulled over by police for petty traffic infractions or for no reason at all, just driving around San Francisco. I've never been stopped in the city. It's clear that my Black colleagues experience the world differently than I do and



that as an executive, I feel it's vital for Airbnb to have that experience reflected inside the company.

[\(07:59\)](#):

When the subject of racial discrimination comes up, I want these voices around the table to make sure that the assumptions of those who have never experienced it don't dominate the discussion. You don't know what you don't know. If we ignore the feelings and dignity of our employees and fail to tap into the richness of experience and perspective that diversity brings, we'll probably fail over time to best serve our host and guest. We won't see our diverse customers in a realistic way. We won't maximize the value of our human capital. Eventually we won't attract or retain the top talent.

[\(08:38\)](#):

And then the last little section. When I was young, I remember once walking into a grocery store with my mother, Kitty Chesnut in the middle of the parking lot she stopped looking at the money in her hand that she had gotten from the cashier. "We've got to go back inside.", she said. "The clerk gave us the wrong change." We walked back in and I recall waiting impatiently as my mom got the attention of the cashier and began to talk. I remember the surprise and gratitude from the clerk, the effusive thank yous. The clerk did not shortchange my mom. She had given my mom too much money and my mom was returning it. There would've been a dozen good reasons for my mom to just keep the few extra dollars that day. And I've heard those reasons from other people. "The store makes a lot of money. Their prices are ridiculously high. We spend a lot of money in that store. I'm sure they shortchanged me in the past when I didn't notice it. I didn't have the time to go back in and deal with it. It's their mistake and their problem."

[\(09:44\)](#):

But my mom's explanation that day taught me a critical lesson about integrity. It doesn't belong to us.", she explained. She repeated that lesson to me many



times in many different contexts, always driving up a point that stuck with me. That's what I would call leadership from the CEO. And as my kids will tell you, we've marched back into a couple of stores to return excess change or pay for an item that accidentally didn't get rung up. They roll their eyes and complain a bit, but I look at it as a learning opportunity, not an inconvenience. And I still enjoy the stunned expression on the cashier's face.

[\(10:19\)](#):

It can be discouraging to read the news. Every day it seems there's another integrity scandal; cheating to get into schools, sexual predators, corporate financial scandals, corporate coverups, fake news. And as we take in the bad, I think we all approach an ethical fork in the road on how to respond. The low road is, "Everybody's getting theirs, I need to get mine." The high road is, "I've had enough of all this and somehow in my own way, I need to do something about it." Dishonesty is contagious, but so is integrity. And a great place to start is at work.

MBS [\(11:02\)](#):

Rob, that's a great read and thank you. And particularly prescient, because I imagine you wrote that six or nine months ago, that's the nature of books and everything you're talking about, particularly about through that racial lens at the start is particularly vivid. Very much so in the US but also in Canada where I'm based, Australia, other places around the world as well. So thank you for that. I love this idea of integrity is catching and infectious. That's brilliant. And the subtitle of your book is Smart Companies Creating An Ethical Revolution. What's the revolution that you want? What do you imagine in your best of worlds has changed and shifted around this whole sense of ethics?

Rob [\(11:48\)](#):

Well, what we've seen is that people expect more of companies. I think the data shows that they've lost faith in government's ability to effectively deal with



some of the big problems in the world. I mean, climate change is just one example. And the number one place that people look in order to solve society's biggest problems are corporations and corporate leaders. And I think people are less tolerant of bad behavior. And in fact, there's now a grand stage to reveal corporate behavior, bad corporate behavior. And that's the internet. Look at what Susan Fowler's blog post did to Uber.

[\(12:24\)](#):

Employees used to be afraid to speak up. Now they've got Blind, they've got Glassdoor, they can blog, they're on Slack, they're talking to each other, they're speaking up and they're walking out. Customers are now moving their dollars to spend it on companies whose values are aligned with their own. So we've seen a marked change, Michael, just in the last couple of years, where there's this giant shift toward, "We want companies that have a purpose beyond just making money. We want them to solve these problems," and the world is going to insist on it. So companies can either ignore this and be dragged through, I think, a lot of problems publicly with their brand, or they can recognize it and ride the surf and actually be propelled by it.

MBS [\(13:21\)](#):

Rob, it's been a great conversation. I'm so thrilled that you've got your book coming out. For people who want to find out more about you and more about the book that you've written, where can they find you in the world?

Rob [\(13:32\)](#):

I'm on LinkedIn all the time writing different stories about integrity. Feel free to follow me, reach out and connect with me on LinkedIn. I've got a website, [www.intentionalintegrity.com](http://www.intentionalintegrity.com).





MBS ([13:47](#)):

Thank you for listening. Thank you for spreading the love. It's always appreciated when you take one interview, maybe this interview and say, "I'm going to share this with one person." We grow our listener base one person at a time. Thank you if you've taken the time to give us reviews as well. We are slowly but surely accumulating some very lovely comments there. And if you're willing to give a click somewhere and five stars and a nice comment, I really appreciate that. You're awesome and you're doing great.