Almost 20 years ago I read an article in *Environmental News Digest* (e.n.d.) titled, “Be an Environmental Health Paragon.” I could not find a citation so I apologize to you and the author. The author professed that as environmental health professionals, we must establish ourselves as paragons in order to insure a positive future for environmental health. (A paragon is a model or pattern of excellence.) As a new environmental health department manager, I was curious and contemplated as to how a person, organization, or profession could become a “model of excellence.” I was motivated to study leaders, businesses, and certain professions to determine attributes of commonality and differentiation that support or impede growth and success.

Retrospectively, subsequent to study and a career of more than 25 years in environmental health, I can attest that two attributes that enable growth and success rise above others. These two attributes confirm trust—ethical behavior builds trust and integrity sustains it. Ethics and integrity facilitate growth, success, and excellence!

“Ethical” derives from the Greek word “ethos”—meaning “character” or “sentiment of the community.” Ayn Rand, the revered 20th century author of classic business fiction such as *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, mused that ethics are a “code of values which guide our choices and actions and determine the purpose of our lives.”

Contemporary ethics discussion often invokes reference to decisions, choices, actions, and behaviors that reflect and enact what we believe is right or what we believe is fair or has worth or importance. Extending the discussion of ethics from personal to professional, one could surmise professional ethics as standards of conduct and behavior that come with a yet higher standard of expectation—professionalism.

Exercising personal and professional ethics within the “sentiment of the community” earns trust. When a person, organization, or profession earns trust, certain values are expected. Values that earn trust include honesty, integrity, accountability, pursuit of excellence, and courage that is not only physical but moral and ethical. Of these, the value that sustains trust is integrity.

In an ideal world, acting ethically with utmost integrity would be the norm—a way of living or conducting business consistent with values and the guiding beliefs of the community. Everyone would make decisions and take action based on a commitment to honesty, ethics, and fairness. In itself, this would promote and sustain trust. However, as you know, in the real world this is not always the case.

Many recent and obvious examples of integrity lapses are grand in scale—the majority of which are catastrophic to individuals and organizations with reach that has potential to jade an entire profession. My focus, however, is on individuals who choose to act on temptations and pressures that at the time of occurrence are easily rationalized.

It starts with the individual. Such lapses are compromises of personal ethics that extend to organizational and professional integrity. Such compromises come with a dear price to what one may profess is acceptable at the moment. (I recently had the unfortunate task of managing and ultimately terminating and prosecuting an employee for a catastrophic lapse in ethics and integrity. Not only did the employee suffer loss of career and a bright future, but integrity of the department and profession were equally called into question.)

In this time of distrust and cynicism, environmental health professionals must hold ethics and integrity as unimpeachable and paramount to personal and professional identity. If potential for dilemma occurs, work through these six questions summarized by the Bentley College Center for Business Ethics: 1) Is it right? (Theory of Ethics); 2) Is it fair? (Theory of Justice); 3) Who gets hurt? (Greatest Good for the Greatest Number); 4) How will it look? (Principle of Disclosure); 5) Would you tell your children or family? (Principle of Reversibility); and 6) How does it smell? (Principle of Intuition). If your sixth sense causes trepidation with any of one of the six questions, regroup, refocus, and redirect.

Dov Seidman stated in his book, *How: Why We Do Anything Means Everything*, we must “outbehave” detractors and competition. We must “create value and differentiation through our behavior both individually and
organizationally.” I would add “professionally” to end the axiom. It all starts with a personal commitment to honesty, objectivity, and fairness that is beyond reproach. Professionals must earn and sustain the trust and confidence of those with whom, and for whom, we live and work. This is how you achieve excellence!

As an environmental professional, credentialed by the National Environmental Health Association, I hereby acknowledge, accept, and profess to abide by the following code of conduct and ethics:

- As long as my credential is in active status, I shall endeavor to keep myself current and informed and satisfy any continuing education requirements that may be in effect for my credential.
- I will proudly represent my credentialed status and the credential itself to my professional peers, and to the public I serve.
- In the course of performing my duties, I will conduct myself in a professional manner befitting of my credentialed status.
- For the sake of elevating the recognition and status of my field, I will actively encourage my professional colleagues to consider earning this credential for themselves.
- I will do nothing to undermine, detract from, or otherwise cause to develop any damaging associations with respect to this credential. I accept that any activity on my part that will cause this credential any measure of injury serves as a breach and a failure on my part to uphold this code of ethics. Moreover, I accept that such action, for which I might be responsible, could result in the revocation of my credential.
- I commit that my professional goal is to serve humankind by doing whatever I am able to do in the course of carrying out my professional responsibilities to maintain and provide a healthful environment for all.