

“How do I live and work with integrity without shooting myself in the foot?”

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**Conscience is a fragile thing. It needs support from institutions,
and that support is weakening.**

—Abraham Zaleznik

Don't take it personal. It's just business ...

Facing tough choices—your ethics or your job—is the stuff of heroes at work. Standing for something often puts our personal security at risk and tests our own integrity to the core. The Enron flameout exposed the moral and ethical dilemmas that put our personal integrity on the line, but situations like these are commonplace. None of this is new. The competition model, “What’s in it for me?” creates a workforce that believes they must become ruthless just to survive. Researchers attribute much of the subtly insidious violence done to individuals at work to business executives’ view that their work is neither moral nor immoral, but *amoral*—not caring about whether their acts are right or wrong. “*Invisible* economic market factors *mysteriously* justify and control decisions regardless of the harm done.”¹ [Emphasis added.]

I witnessed these practices up close and personal fifteen years ago at a high technology company modeled after the “IBM Way” of doing business. The company values were strategically posted throughout the facility. “Respect for the individual” topped the list as the hallmark of success.

The company’s growth skyrocketed, doubling sales each year. The plant ran at full capacity, 24-7’s providing more income for its employees than they ever dreamed possible. The push for more production was unrelenting, honoring the sacred cows of “income projections” more than the health and well-being of its employees. Soon employee morale went in the toilet in conjunction with the push to work harder and longer hours to make more money at any price.

It was easier to show respect during the days when there was plenty of money and opportunity; however, five class-action suits by stockholders against the company for insider trading quickly changed everything. The stock prices plummeted, sales declined, and a massive coverup of slumping sales was implemented. Since manufacturing budgets were based upon the number of sales orders received from clients, the numbers of “units built” were often used to manipulate stock prices up by using them as indicators of demand for the product.

More and more units were built but not shipped, the inventory of products growing larger and larger. Pretty soon it became obvious there were no orders for the product, merely the public statements of numbers of units built. It was an unethical “management strategy” to try to force the price of the stock back up.

At the same time, my colleagues and I were training all the managers in principled-centered leadership skills championed by Stephen Covey. I went home every night feeling sick to my stomach, torn between my values and the unethical sham I knew about. I didn’t have a clue about how to deal with it. I was scared. What started out being my dream job turned into a nightmare. If I brought the issues out into the open I would jeopardize the jobs of many others as well as my own. It was a profound moral dilemma. Every imagined consequence of confronting the situation seemed dire indeed; but the consequences of not confronting it was making me sick.



*Fear is an important variable in the issue
of adversity and abuse in the workplace.*

Alexander Hamilton understood something of the double bind and personal despair created when one’s livelihood is threatened. He said, “In the main it will be found that a power over a man’s support [salary] is a power over his will.” When organizations and its people are moving toward decline— or on the opposite extreme, implementing stringent cost-saving measures to increase profits—the need for power and control is paramount. Real or imagined consequences—especially during hard or greedy economic times—bring out the worst in people. This is especially true if the company is training the entire workforce in “principle-centered” work practices at the very time

they are stock-piling product in the back room and using every staff meeting to ridicule its employees for not producing better and quicker results!

Tolstoy said, “Men sometimes act unlike themselves.” In other words, respect usually goes in the toilet when organizations are in trouble or when the pressure is turned up to maintain unprecedented growth. In situations of uncertainty and upheaval, exploitative behaviors such as greed, manipulation, and “dirty politics” dominate. Extremism is rationalized, responsibility is reduced. Managing image becomes more important than reality and truth.

Sadly, men and women are acting unlike themselves at work. False pretense is commonplace. In a study reported by NBC News of 40,000 employees, *93 percent* admitted to lying habitually on the job. The report said workers deceive 30 percent of the people they interact with each week.² Is it any wonder that trust has plummeted in recent years? When asked the question, “Do you believe most people can be trusted?” in 1960, 60 percent of the respondents said yes; in 1996, 37 percent said yes.³ This figure would surely be higher in today’s crisis atmosphere. When image becomes more important than truth, dishonesty flourishes, abuse accelerates, and the workplace grows more dysfunctional.



Myth: Looking good is being good.

This depersonalized and deceptive way of relating to each other at work is a fast way of abandoning the essential aims of life present in each of us in favor of those of the organization. Gradually and almost imperceptibly, we lose our human dignity, moral integrity, and personal identity. Instead of living within the truth, we “adapt” to organizational life by learning to “live within the lie.” In so doing, we, in effect, give license not only to *corporate* immorality but to our *own* as well. R. D. Laing expressed it well:

They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play the game, of not seeing that I play the game.⁴

Sanctioning a bogus reality

In *The Power of the Powerless*, Václav Havel describes how we become debased instruments of the administration by capitulating to a bogus reality. Havel wrote about and was imprisoned for his observations of daily life under communist rule in Eastern Europe. As in many of our American businesses, lies and hypocrisy permeated the Czech government. He described how the Czech citizenry who “live[d] within the lie” institutionalized a false society by going along with the official party line whether it reflected their own personal beliefs or not. By behaving as if they supported the regime, either through display of slogans in their windows or voting in elections that were meaningless, they, perhaps unwittingly, sanctioned a corrupt system. Through their silence and indifference, these demoralized people perpetuated their own lack of personal freedom and identity.⁵

This is also true in the workplace. To challenge the system through authentic and congruent behavior is perceived by many as tantamount to signing their own death warrant. By breaking the rules of the game, they expose that it is merely a game. By saying the emperor has no clothes, they expose the system for what it often is: an ideology of manipulation and repression. The lust for power, fame, and wealth replaces natural inclinations to community, service, and personal growth. The success of the economy is built on the backs of millions of workers who are trading their commitment to personal freedom and responsibility for the captivity of consumerism and materialism. The self-determining independent life is traded for the contingent corporate life.

Heroes like Havel believe



Truth trumps image.

Though many people find it easier to sell out, deep down they know that if we disconnect from the truth for the external rewards of getting the most toys, we have weakened the glue that holds our society together. The new value system—values that include widening disparities in wealth, *individual* rights at the expense of rights of the group, situational ethics, self-interest and self-gratification, and assured entitlement—each of these values challenges the moral authority and social responsibility of all Americans.

The Affliction of Double Binds

There is alchemy in sorrow, especially in the anguish of feeling torn between our values and our livelihood. These crises of conscience and conviction test our moral and ethical bearings in gut-wrenching but self-defining ways. In the everyday stream of our lives, if we respond with courage, humility, and compassion, the ordinary material of ourselves is changed into gold. It's no use ranting, wishing, and waiting for the "world" to behave as we want it to.

Dealing with double binds requires clarity of purpose and values, setting and maintaining well-defined boundaries, taking a stand in respectful, savvy, nonpunishing ways, and holding fast to the belief that the "cream will rise" by making principled choices. The fear of making things worse is one of the biggest deterrents to working our way through double binds. Our fear holds us hostage as we adopt "survival tactics," often carried over from childhood. In these tough moments, we "act unlike ourselves."

One of the best illustrations of some typical responses and scenarios whereby we "sell ourselves short" in a crises of conscience is told by Jerry Harvey who writes about the impact of downsizing as one of the chief contributors to what he calls "anaclitic depression and marasmus." In this context, he describes how we often participate in the victimization of others by our silent consent. He compares the collaborative role played by the Jewish councils in the liquidation of their own people (including, in the end, themselves) to the collusion required for a successful RIF (reduction in force). Under the Nazi regime, members of the Jewish councils closely cooperated in the destruction of their friends, relatives, and associates by compiling lists for the Nazis of persons to be deported. They secured money from deportees to pay the expenses associated with their own destruction, distributing yellow star badges and arm bands so the Nazis could easily identify their victims. The Jewish councils also collected and turned over the assets of those who were deported. They stood watch during the actual seizure of people and property and helped decide the precious few who were saved.⁶

In studying Adolph Eichmann's life, Harvey found not a single recorded instance in Eichmann's SS career when anyone confronted him directly with the immorality of his actions. He found no record of a co-worker, friend, or family member who reminded Eichmann of his potential choice to behave with moral virtue. Eichmann testified that no one ever reproached him about the

performance of his duties. Those around him just carried out their duties in their pre-determined roles without question or challenge.

When faced with tremendous internal pressure to surrender our conscience or moral authority to that of the institution, it seems easier to escape the anxiety of being accountable for our choices. By responding passively to a decision that harms others, whether it is a RIF or some other way to intimidate, manipulate, or oppress others, we prostitute our own souls. We destroy the delicate threads that hold us together. We then develop defensive routines that justify our complicity in the process. We then begin to “live within the lie,” described by Harvey and Havel. (Educator and philosopher Terry Warner also describes this as “self-betrayal”). Harvey further explains these thought patterns as a means to make life tolerable for those bound together by destructive collusive decisions:

An Encompassing Theory. We develop a rationale to justify what we are doing, such as: To become more competitive in world markets we have to accept higher levels of unemployment to slow inflation. We need to lay people off because of productivity improvement claims.

Euphemisms. We hide the stark cold reality of our decisions by talking about it in benign terms: firing people becomes “RIFs,” “downsizing,” “outplacement,” “position audits,” “career alteration,” “strategic re-alignment,” “release of resources,” “rightsizing,” “force management program,” “reshaping,” or “elimination of employee security policy.”

Slogans and Clichés. Other trite phrases that conceal truth and that deflect us from practicing true benevolence are “Be a team player,” “When the going gets tough, the tough get going,” “It hurts *me* to *have* to do this,” “We just have to “bite the bullet,” or “He/she’s not a good fit,” “We’re getting rid of *dead wood*.” In one company where the senior vice president broke his hand in anger by pounding on the table, the slogans “Respect for the individual,” and “PRIDE” blanketed every department.

Negative fantasies. We imagine disastrous future consequences to convince us we really have no choice but to behave as we do. Most of these fears are not grounded in reality. Research of the holocaust records indicated it was quite easy for members of the extermination squads to opt out without serious consequences. Losing our livelihood by behaving morally or responsibly is rarely the case.

Inner Emigration. This means feeling the same way the person who is dissenting feels, but

not letting on. Harvey explains,

It[inner emigration] occurs when we are joined by an emigrant colleague as we leave a staff meeting, and he or she puts an arm around our shoulder and says: “I loved the way you argued with the boss in there. You said just what I wanted to say. I was tempted to help you out, but you said it so well I didn’t think there was any need for me to comment. I want you to know, though, that I was with you all the way despite my silence. Incidentally, I’m sorry about your being fired for raising hell. I hope you find another job soon, and do let me know if you need to talk with someone. I’m an excellent listener.”⁷

The research of Solomon Asch on conformity notes that while single dissenters are often swayed by group opinion, that power is significantly reduced if someone else speaks up. In terms of influence, three dissenters carry as much influence as thirty.⁸

Rules and Regulations. Strict adherence to “bureaucratic buffoonery” imbues “the system” with a life of its own, exerting power over us that prevents us from behaving morally and sensibly. Many workers would like to believe morality equals following the rules of the company. However, research suggests those rules are often deliberately left vague in areas where unethical action could benefit the company and clearly spelled out in ethical dilemmas that undermine corporate performance, such as conflict of interest, or fraud. In areas deliberately left vague, workers are often referred to their bosses for clarification. Since pressure for unethical action often comes from above, this means giving the fox the keys to the henhouse for safekeeping.⁹

Selective Memory. Selective forgetfulness is used as a way to escape the painful details of personal and interpersonal betrayal.

I had many experiences in my career with selective memory. The first one was the hardest to accept. Fresh out of graduate school, I did a culture audit of a division of a large corporation—a study identifying many patterns of behavior much like a personality profile. The purpose of the data was to provide feedback to improve performance, which was lagging in the division. The report contained information provided by several dozen managers detailing some of the problems needing correction. My manager put the report aside for weeks, avoiding any discussion or direction concerning the circulation of the report to other key managers. Whenever the report was mentioned, he excused himself, saying he had “forgotten” it. After several months, it became obvious the manager just didn’t want to share the information, some of which could have been interpreted as unfavorable to our department.

Lying. The ability to lie to ourselves and others gradually slips up on us in the guise of survival, slowly dulling our sensibilities to the point that the very life of the organization and the people who work there *really* becomes jeopardized because the very foundation of the system is based on untruths. When 93 percent of the people admit to lying routinely on the job, it's a miracle anything worthwhile is accomplished.¹⁰

Comparing the Holocaust to the massive “de-jobbing” in America is not intended to trivialize the greatest tragedy of human kind but only to show the similarities in the *processes* involved when one is faced with immoral or unethical acts. But most important, it is to show the other side of this astonishing story, the heroic response of the Danes who resisted the Nazis's attempts to get them to conspire with them to deport Jews from Denmark. Danish resistance virtually defeated the Nazi effort in their country. Every Dane's dissent sent the powerful message, “There are some things worth suffering and fighting for,” even in a situation that appeared hopelessly evil.

Few of us will ever encounter such abuse of power. But, the temptations and tendencies lie lurking within each of us, threatening to pull us from our responsibility to ourselves and to each other. Unwittingly, we often repress our true feelings because of social pressure. At other times, social pressure is so great we don't even know we are doing it. Some organizational demands have minimal effects on the nature of our character: they involve issues of personality, style, history and norms—there are no standards of “right” versus “wrong” here, just differences in preference, familiarity, and comfort.

People tend to *accept* organizational demands which are *comfortable* and *attractive* regardless of the effects those demands have on their character. Consequently both areas of strength and weakness will become stronger.

People tend to *reject* organizational demands which are *uncomfortable* and *unattractive* regardless of the effects those demands have on their character. Thus, legitimate opportunities for growth are often perceived and attacked as though they were coercive demands for compromise.

Integrity requires that comfort and attractiveness take a lower priority to the effects any demand might have on our character. “Seeing the end from the beginning” is very difficult, particularly when the path involves losing some of our favorite vices along the way.

An example of a popular vice of placing personal comfort over personal integrity is the “Abilene Paradox,” a story told by Jerry Harvey about how events frequently gather momentum and take on

lives of their own, despite the fact that nobody wants to take part in them. In the story, everyone is in *unknowing agreement with one another* concerning the organization's problems and the steps necessary to solve them. Yet, because they fail to speak out, they continue on a path no one wants!

It is customary to hide what we really think at work because we are afraid to bring it out into the open. In doing so, organizations continually set themselves up for failure creating cynicism, disillusionment, mistrust, deception, and the inability to take risks. The paradox is that others are *also* hiding the same things we think but don't say! Often the participants really disagree with the decisions being made but think since others support the decisions, they must too. Too scared of rejection, the participants just go along against their true wishes or judgment. Thus, in many situations there is *already* agreement about what *really* needs to be done, but it is *hidden*.

Whose responsibility is it to get us out of this mess?! Isn't it the bosses?! Harvey reminds us once again of our complicity in most situations. He asks, "How come every time I get stabbed in the back my fingerprints are on the knife?" Harvey's point is that the power to break the destructive pattern of the paradox comes from *anyone* choosing to take the risk of confronting the situation regardless of their position or authority.¹¹

Also, the social pressure phenomenon of "groupthink" creates disastrous results. Under these circumstances the group uses self-censorship and mind guards to prevent anyone from considering conflicting points of view. Conflicting information is dismissed or ignored, and the group is amazed when calamity follows. The Bay of Pigs and Watergate are two examples of this kind of group tyranny. The same was true with the *Challenger* disaster wherein seven astronauts died in a fiery explosion while millions of people watched in horror. According to one researcher, several people knew of the cold spots on a booster rocket but failed to communicate the information to the proper authorities. One scientist took the chance and advised against the launch, encouraging a delay until the temperature warmed. According to the scientist, the launch was carried out despite his warning of the risks because of public relations reasons. If the launch were delayed, school would not be in session on a weekend and children would not be able to view the launch. He said one of the space administration's major goal for the *Challenger* mission was to rebuild the declining public support of space exploration by having a schoolteacher on board.

Nonconformity is essential to making good decisions and perfecting our souls. Emerson said,

Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind A man

is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions.¹²

Regardless of where we are in the hierarchy, our salvation comes from how we respond in the thousands of personal interactions with others, especially to those who are subordinated to us either in spirit or by position. We recognize that the worlds of the powerful and the powerless are profoundly connected, rendering us cynical or savvy in the ways of wisdom at work.

Taking a Stand

In *Death of Outrage*, William Bennett reminds us of our moral responsibility to speak out against things we think are wrong. He says, “In a self-governing and law-abiding nation, we must never allow ourselves to be lulled into passive disgust or indifference, the civic equivalent of a shrug of the shoulders. We must never lose our sense, when appropriate, of outrage.”¹³ “*When appropriate*” are the operative words to which I might add “*respectful*” outrage (if that’s not a contradiction in terms). Truth is always appropriate; it is best within the parameters of compassion.



Speak the truth tempered with mercy.

Personally and organizationally we are dead without the truth clothed in kindness. It is not helpful to anyone to “turn the other cheek” until we have turned our heads backward! By protecting, denying, ignoring, withholding, lying, hiding, and being politically correct, we become partners in the adversity, perpetuating situations which need to stop—not just for our own sake or for the good of the company, but also for the welfare of the one who is involved in the misdeed. It’s interpersonal suicide to lie and withhold information. Likewise being “brutally” honest and personally “ruthless” create defensiveness and destroy trust. The use of sarcasm, complaint, anger, and self-righteous indignation make bad situations worse. As Maya Angelou puts it, “Whining is not only graceless, but can be dangerous. It can alert a brute that a victim is in the neighborhood.”¹⁴



Differ with Discernment.

Taking a stand should be done with deliberation and *reasonable* insight and understanding about the goals, costs, and benefits. It is enormously challenging to maintain the delicate balance of merging personal opinions and identity with those of the organization. If we spoke out on everything we felt, issues both great and small, we would be viewed as such a threat to the organization we would never be trusted with important assignments. The boundaries of dissonance and dissent vary widely in organizations collectively and individually. Our tolerance for differences and disagreement are as personal and individual as are our abilities to respond with wise judgment and interpersonal skill. Thinking about and coming to terms with our own *tolerance quotient* helps to anticipate and prevent problems.

The movement toward openness and communicating *feelings* is also not without pitfalls. For example, in the same way withholding information is detrimental, so is indiscriminate openness and trust.



*Myth: By sharing my true feelings with someone,
he or she will respond to my needs.*

Maybe, maybe not. The proliferation of self-help material and pop psychology has made many workers sitting ducks in the pitiful pool of “I messages!” The assumptions underlying the value of telling others how you feel is that they *want to know* what you feel, that they will *care* how you feel if they know, and they will *change* what they are doing if it is *hurtful* to you. Relying upon psychological or rational solutions in abusive situations at work (or elsewhere) in fact often *enables* manipulative and insincere co-workers to not only continue but to intensify their destructive behavior. *The very nature of a psychological remedy presumes open, honest communication and a dedication to truth, which almost always is lacking when abuse is present.* Speaking up for what we believe in, reclaiming our dignity and self-respect, defining for ourselves and others the parameters within which we wish to be treated and how we will treat others may work out well, but it might not. Defining the bottom line (or drawing an imaginary line in the sand) creates a controlled

crisis from which positive change *may* occur. It may also make things worse in the short run. Havel reminds us there are no guarantees:

When a person tries to act in accordance with his conscience, when he tries to speak the truth, when he tries to behave like a citizen, even in conditions where citizenship is degraded, it won't necessarily lead anywhere, but it *might*. [Emphasis added.] There's one thing, however, that will never lead anywhere, and that is speculating that such behavior will lead somewhere.¹⁵

It's a pig in a poke. You could wind up a hero or be perceived as a troublemaker. The threat to our livelihood—of making things worse—is one of the biggest things that holds us back. If you fail to speak up and it's discovered later you should have, you only delay the inevitable, usually at a higher price. Yet, if the basic aim of being a “dissident” is to serve the truth and the real purposes of life, the reward is in the “dissent” itself. The gratification of living an independent life of integrity makes up for a world of what on the surface may appear to be losses. Living true to your own values and beliefs is its own reward. Sometimes, there is virtue in *losing*. Nevertheless, savvy workers make a concerted effort to develop the skills needed to feel secure in this arena.

Defining Boundaries/Managing Boundary Violations

Robert Frost said, “Good fences make good neighbors.” Establishing boundaries act as guideposts along the hero's path. Boundaries define the limits of our emotional, physical, spiritual, or sexual relationships with each other—they tell us that certain behavior is unsuitable in the context of certain relationships. A boundary violation occurs when someone knowingly or unknowingly crosses the line of what we feel is acceptable. It may be both deliberate or accidental. It can be innocently committed out of kindness or maliciously committed out of animosity.

More often than not, personal boundaries have been violated when there's adversity at work. Managing our boundaries at work is difficult because these “unwritten rules” vary from person to person, situation to situation, and culture to culture, thus making us feel like we're shooting at a moving target! Our ability to set and respect appropriate boundaries begins in infancy. In a healthy family we learn to respect the rights and feelings of others, what is appropriate in our interactions with each other. As we know, in an unhealthy family the reverse is also true. People learn these subtle clues about boundary management mostly by observing others' actions, both good and bad, in the give and take, the ebb and flow of human interactions.

The goal is to form boundaries that are appropriate to the situation—some that have flexibility, some that are rigid. Boundaries should be distinct enough to preserve our individuality yet open enough to admit new ideas and perspectives. They should be firm enough to keep our values clear, but open enough to allow for differences with others. They should be closed enough to withstand invasion from the crude, the rude, and unrighteous domination.

Many people at work know very little about “fence building and maintenance,” especially if their family of origin was dysfunctional in some way. And whose wasn’t? I’ve made my share of mistakes in taking a stand and setting boundaries.

In one situation, my manager had the habit of ridiculing me and his other subordinates in the weekly staff meeting. He was a large man, about 6 feet 4 inches tall and was intimidating by his very presence (especially since I am barely five feet tall and weigh a little over a hundred pounds). The company was experiencing a major downturn in sales, and the president and CEO of the company never missed an opportunity to tell all of us what losers we were. My boss accelerated his tendency to do the same.

It was an unusually stressful time for me. I worked 12 to 14-hour days, commuted more than an hour and a half each way, and struggled with the challenge of blending two families in a second marriage. On several occasions I used my best communication skills to no avail to try to reason with my boss. Quite foolishly one day, following one of his tirades, I jumped to my feet and saluted him saying, “*Yes suh, Massuh, anything you say, Massuh!*” I rejoiced in my courageous attempt to reclaim my self-respect. But, a short time later, my “heroic” stand invoked the Law of the Hog when management “right-sized” the company by laying off more than 300 people. The Hog ate me and dozens of other good people who had made politically incorrect choices, including the only employee so technically indispensable that the company carried a life insurance policy on him! People rarely get fired for such impulsiveness as mine, especially if they’re good workers. However, a reduction in workforce provides a politically correct opportunity to get revenge.

To set a more effective boundary with my boss, I should have chosen a time out of the heat of the moment to say something like “I can see from your response to me yesterday, that you are very upset with my performance. I didn’t intend to disappoint you, and I’m very sorry. I am committed to giving you and (name of company) my very best. I am trying very hard to meet your expectations. But, when you raise your voice and put me down, I find it very difficult to stay motivated or focused on my work and also to respect you. Please speak to me in a calm tone and in a respectful way to help me understand what you want. ”

Another mistake we often make in organizations is inappropriately taking a stand on behalf of someone else. Instead of helping the mistreated person improve the situation for him or herself, the “rescuer” often becomes the victim. People who feel victimized often engage others to “do their anger” for them by appealing to co-workers’ sense of fair play. A compassionate intent to help rectify injustice can easily turn into a death sentence for unsuspecting good people at work.

Loving the soul of another ...

These are difficult issues with no easy answers. We each have to find our own way with a lot of help from God and our friends. Having compassion for ourselves and others during hard times makes heroes of us all.

How do *you* live and work with integrity without shooting yourself in the foot? Let us hear from you.

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