

Do Your Principles Matter?

The instruction was issued: “Your objective is to get Gary Powers”. James Donovan had recently defended a Russian spy caught in the USA. Having been “invited” the government to undertake the spy’s defence, he had then been placed under pressure to defend half-heartedly. He became a target of hate and anger from people who judged him as wrong for defending such an enemy of the state. A US pilot of a spy plane was shot down in Soviet airspace and had not taken the cyanide tablet as expected of him. A spy exchange was required. Donovan was invited to conduct the negotiation. At the same time Frederic Pryor, an American student, had been arrested in East Berlin for being on the wrong side of the previously non-existent wall at the wrong time. Instructed to get the spy and ignore the student, Donovan retrieved both men in the exchange. Donovan was subsequently successful negotiating a major exchange following the Bay of Pigs débâcle in Cuba. He was successful in achieving more than was requested because a) he held a bigger picture of what was possible than those issuing orders; b) he had principles and values that really mattered to him; and c) he stuck to his principles and values regardless of pressure from others.



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Abstract

Principled behaviour requires you to know your values and hold to them. This article explores some of the personal requirements for principled behaviour, and some of examples of where principles were abandoned.

Keywords

Leadership, personal power, values

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Institutions and leaders often expect us to assume specific roles and deliver purely on what is requested, without question and without deviation. The higher the authority, the more strongly the edicts seem to be when issued, and the stronger the consequences of non-compliance. Questioning, challenging or otherwise apparently going against leadership is treated as a crime. All too often orders are issued with the expectation of blind, unquestioning obedience. At the same time, these same leaders hold closed sessions from which orders are issued, unwilling to share rationale and expose themselves to challenge. We are expected to not only accept the instructions but also believe they have “our best interests” at heart.

In my years of working with large numbers of organisations, and experiencing many “leaders” issue instructions that make little sense to me, the person expected to implement them, I do believe we need to maintain our sense of self, our willingness and ability to question and challenge, and not walk blindly into someone else’s minefield. All too often we park who we are at the door as we enter our place of employment and cease to practice what we believe in.

One of the more famous ethical débâcles was the 1970's Ford Pinto safety issue, where a slow-speed rear-end collision could result in the Ford Pinto to erupt into a ball of flame. The recall did not come because the \$11 fix per car cost more collectively than the expected value of the human lives (estimated at about \$200K) that would arise from such accidents. Prior to joining Ford Dennis Gioia was an opponent of the Vietnam war and strongly concerned about the ethical conduct of business. He joined Ford as a problem analyst and later was the field recall coordinator, yet he did not recall the Pinto. As he later reflected in papers he wrote on his own experience, he parked his thinking and challenging and principled nature at the door, and adopted the script handed to him by the organisation. He assumed the role the organisation dictated, and lost sight of what mattered to him.

We get hired for who we present at an interview, and then we take up the role, and park what we value of ourselves outside. We cease being that person who succeeded in the interview. We lose who we are in the process... unless we choose not to.

I am not suggesting "I am always right". I do suggest that more of the instructions issued and roles defined need

to be challenged, and that as each individual honours their own values and principles, and does not cower down unquestioningly to those in higher authority, some of the débâcles may actually be prevented, and the quality of decisions improved. Yes, there are times to follow instructions and do what is requested. Also, if everything was challenged by everyone, nothing could progress. Sometimes what is being asked for is suspect and deserves to be named as such. Plenty of research highlights the value of challenge to improving decisions, yet challenge is often actively avoided by those making the decisions.

What are the principles and values you treasure as being fundamentally defining of who you are? Do they remain present and visible in your organisational role? If not, what is that costing you?

Reference

Trevino, L. K. and Nelson, K. A. (2011). *Managing Business Ethics: Straight Talk About How To Do It Right*. USA: John Wiley and Sons Inc (Fifth Edition).

For more information related to themes in this article, refer to chapter 11 (Purposeful Forward Movement) of: Harrison, S. G. (2012). [*Appreciate the Fog: Embrace Change with Power and Purpose*](#). Auckland, New Zealand: Xlibris Corporation.

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