

Lead with Integrity



Every day, unexpected events and situations require us to make split-second decisions that have no easy solutions. They also may have long term consequences for our professional and personal lives, for our employers, and for our profession.

*W*e usually have no way to measure the costs of our decisions, until it is too late. The tension that exists between what we feel we must resist and what we will adapt to plays out when what we are resisting is power and pressure. How we choose to live into that tension makes all the difference.

Good leaders stand up for their values when faced with tough decisions. Good business includes teaching, coaching and mentoring those who need it. But are you up to the task to stand up for your own personal values? How do you do it without being labeled a “caped crusader” or a “goody two shoes?” These are not easy questions. Hard lessons will teach that through experience, it is not necessary to compromise your integrity to succeed as a community manager. Here are a few guiding principles that will steer anyone towards good decisions when facing large and small dilemmas in the workplace.

Develop a Moral Compass

Start by knowing...really knowing...who you are. We all grow from being tested in making tough decisions. Deciding in the fire of battle where you are going to take your stand defines your character more than mouthing platitudes. We all need ethical awareness and ethical imagination over the whole course of our lives – and we need to support each other in raising ethical issues.

We should attempt to learn something from each assignment or transaction we work on, and from each person – whether board member, employer, leader, or colleague – to whom we are exposed. Surround yourself with deep, trusting relationships.

Understand and Embrace the Covenants of the Organization You Work For

You'll know how to make good decisions if you have a deep sense of the mission and purpose of the enterprise – a far deeper mission than money making or getting a 5 percent contract increase. Knowing who you are and your values, then redefining your stance in light of your experiences, is a mighty big job. But when the job is complete, how do you know if your values match with your work environment? How do you assess your business culture? Search for those objective clues that will allow you to benchmark your values against those of your employer or a client.

Warren Buffet (with whom this author had the pleasure of meeting and having dinner) has stated he has had 20 key decisions in his career. He is a great strategic thinker, and that equates to one decision every couple of years. We should all expect to face 20 ethical decisions, or even crises, over the span of a career.

Choose Your Clients Carefully

Working with a client board of directors whose value system or decisional activities are not in concert with their governing documents, laws, or their fiduciary duty, and especially your company and your personal value system, is a disaster waiting to happen. The obvious goal is to establish a long-term relationship but more importantly, to ensure their decisions can withstand the scrutiny of the owners and the courts.

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This boils down to drawing the proverbial line in the sand – having the courage to tell your client board when, in your professional opinion, they are wrong or when they are taking action that could breach their fiduciary duty as corporate directors.

As we grow ethically sensitive, we learn to see the world and make decisions through a set of filters unique and intuitive. We must also filter in the practical side – that is how the various regulations must influence the corporate decisions by our client board members.

Preparing for the Test

How can we best prepare for the inevitable test? How do we identify the guiding principles that give us confidence in making tough decisions and convincing the client board members to make the right and sometimes very tough decisions? Although not so simple to achieve, it all comes down to integrity. If you are willing to lose a client (when necessary), be accountable in all aspects of your life, then you are certainly moving in the right direction. Leading with integrity and living a life based on sound and solid ethical principles are not contradictory. In fact, these principles are quite harmonious. There is nothing quite as satisfying than taking a stand to do the right thing. Stand up for your values and you'll see what I mean.