

## Does Power Corrupt?

**AN AGE-OLD QUESTION. EVENTS DURING THE** aftermath of the high-flying 1990s—the conviction of Martha Stewart, the WorldCom and Enron indictments—fuel the belief that top managers are greedy, selfish, prone to lie, shade the truth, seek revenge—all in the name of power.

Commonplace perks—the corporate jet, special pension deals, private dining rooms, at-home security—make it appear that two sets of rules apply. And why not? Managing is a 24-hour-a-day job, so why can't certain latitudes be taken?

That's what Wayne thought. He was a highly placed leader at a blue chip company, a household name. He often took his wife along for overseas business trips—getting a first class ticket (permitted by policy) and then exchanging it for two business class seats. Harmless? Certainly a relatively tame transgression by today's standards. But Wayne's CEO didn't think so and fired him. Wayne never understood why, saying, "I wasn't really costing the company anything more than what my trip would have been."

At another firm, senior managers always had one of the junior managers pick up the tab when they were out. That leadership crew did lots of entertaining: fancy restaurants, golf excursions, club dates. Funny, wasn't it, how corporate reviews of their travel and expense forms showed very modest expenditures?

On her first business trip, Betsy took a small advance. Even so, she didn't spend it all and submitted a check for the remainder along with her expense account. Her manager called Betsy into her office and pushed the expense report back across the desk. "You're

not going to spoil things for the rest of us by turning back money," she said. "Do this over."

What's the harm in these seemingly mundane ethical infractions?

For one thing, they can be shockingly obvious throughout an organization and can tacitly endorse an ethos of skirting the rules. At the extreme, managers may come right out and say what they are doing without any shame. And that can establish an "anything goes" climate, one where the ends justify the means.

Admittedly, this can be exciting, even intoxicating. The feeling can be a bit like breaking the speed limit; the stimulation or rush of "getting away with something" can be even better when it's right under the police officer's nose. Who hasn't done something like that at least once in his/her lifetime?

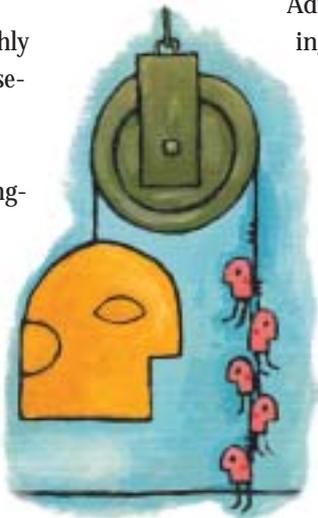
But sooner or later, the debt comes due. Even tiny ethical slips have corrosive effects that become more pronounced with repetition.

Like sand in a gearbox, manager misbehavior gums up the works. Employees become confused, uncertain. Keeping a lie going takes a great deal of mental energy and distracts attention from the task at hand. Guilt leads to odd behaviors that have no rational explanation. Soon, many people in the organization feel like they have a black cloud over their heads. Excitement and misplaced energy leave a hangover that saps productive output.

So where does the manager who aspires to have good character turn for guidance?

### The Golden Rule

People are exquisitely sensitive to the maxim embodied in



the Golden Rule, “Treat others the way that you would want to be treated yourself.” Every religion expresses the idea in some form or another. For the manager, it’s a guidepost to help prevent a wrong turn.

A moment’s reflection on the Golden Rule is all it takes to prevent harmful action. Pause, reflect on the maxim, then act. It’s that simple.

Think that the rule has no place in business? Think again. Service-Master’s statement of values begins and ends with it. And the very first line of Johnson & Johnson’s Credo states, “Our first responsibility is to the mothers, doctors, and patients everywhere who use our products.”

The reason the rule works so powerfully is that the instant a manager establishes a connection with another person, in this case by simply considering the other point of view, her mental processes clear and give her access to her common sense. From this mental state, wrong action feels uncomfortable, even stupid. That inner self-correcting mechanism—our wisdom and insight—leads us along the proper path. Pretty soon, it becomes second nature.

Perhaps the hardest part of truly committing yourself to managing with the rule is the first step. Robert found his early days on this path filled with painful memories and regret for actions that had been self-centered and harmful to others. It took courage to face such behaviors unflinchingly, as well as considerable willpower to go back to those people and apologize, trying to make amends.

Alexander had a similar experience. He spent his early career lying to others and withholding information—all in the name of trying to look good to the boss. He was a treacherous colleague—a self-centered manager who shame-

lessly stole the best ideas from his staff and claimed them as his own.

Alexander believed that he “had” to behave this way if he were going to get ahead. And the fact that he was moving up the career ladder provided justification for what he was doing.

But deep inside, he knew it was wrong. Occasionally, a voice inside his head would whisper that he was inflicting small cuts on his soul. But then his oh-so-rational “ego” would kick in along the lines of, “Hey, it’s a dog-eat-dog world; how else am I to get ahead?”

As he was walking to work one day, Alexander had a sudden realization that his behavior was causing deep pain to others and himself. He stepped back from his own notions about getting ahead long enough to see how his behavior felt to other people. He felt their pain, confusion, and resentment. He also saw the pain he had been causing to himself. His lies, guilt, and backstabbing tormented his every waking hour.

So he decided to stop right then, at that very moment. He vowed to never do it again, to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Easier said than done. Alexander found himself slipping again and again into the old, familiar habits. But he had gotten a bellyful, which gave him the willpower to keep trying.

A chance conversation with a mentor caused Alexander to realize that the only way to permanently change was to face the pain he had caused on his way up the ladder head on, so he started going to former workers, peers, and bosses and simply apologized. His mind was filled with sincerity as he allowed himself to “just be” with the pain. For the most part, people forgave him, easily. Making mistakes like these is part of the human condi-

tion. Who hasn’t been there?

In a few months, Alexander noticed that his acts of acknowledgment, atonement, and forgiveness had cured his bad habits once and for all. He showed that good character can become second nature for managers who devote themselves to the Golden Rule. Each small action ingrains a pattern that feels so positive that working in opposition feels “all wrong.”

The institutional benefit should be obvious. Character creates a positive work environment, allowing staff to focus on the job at hand without distraction. No lost productivity due to gossiping or to conflict between individual needs and those of the institution. Character lubricates the gears so that people are more apt to work harmoniously.

Funny thing about character—it can be contagious. One person who holds his ground is like a light that draws insects. Those around him are reminded of the goodness that is within them and the connections they feel to others.

Alexander has become such a light—a person known for his integrity and consideration, an illuminating force for good everywhere he goes.

You could become such a light in your business, too. ■

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