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Has the art of compromise gone out the window?

By Wallace Immen
From Friday's Globe and Mail

In good times, bosses and employees can expect give-and-take. But now, afraid of losing their jobs, workers are in survival mode

You've committed to spending the holiday week with the family but your boss has other ideas: Work every day to finish a report due by year-end.

In better times, you might try to negotiate a compromise to make it more win/win: a week off later, say, for your sacrifice.

But these days, the art of compromise has gone out the window: Too many people are caving on concessions out of fear for their jobs, says Elizabeth Doty, president of San Francisco-based WorkLore Inc. and author of *The Compromise Trap: How to Thrive at Work Without Selling Your Soul*. That means they are giving up on things important to them, whether material or principles, she says.

In good times, people can expect give-and-take. If the choice seems too lopsided, employees can stand up because they - and their bosses - know they can always walk.

Because they didn't feel big enough to fight, they said they ultimately felt less in control and less capable as a result.

But now, "people who are in survival mode and worried about losing their jobs become short-sighted and go along out of fear, looking only at the high-risk options of fighting back or quitting," rather than anything in between, she says.

Therein lies the trap. Like all good traps, once you've committed to get into it, there is no way out.

Based on interviews she did with 100 U.S. business executives over the past two years, Ms. Doty found that the most common compromise situations, encountered by 60 per cent, was feeling pressure to fudge numbers or gloss over negative consequences. Fifty-four per cent said they had to compromise on the quality of their work, while 52 per cent said they had compromised their personal values to meet management demands. Thirty-eight per cent said they gave up personal time with their families or felt they risked their health and well-being to meet the demands of the business, and 15 per cent were actually told by managers to do something they considered immoral or illegal.

All of them expressed remorse in hindsight about going along, Ms. Doty says. "Because they didn't feel big enough to fight, they said they ultimately felt less in control and less capable as a result."

Not all compromises are unhealthy. "In healthy compromise, you give up something, but what you get in return has greater value," she explains. For instance, by sharing credit for a group effort, you give up some personal ego gratification. However, in the process, you share in success and add value to the company.

To keep compromises healthy, "you have to stand up for your values, and realize you do have options beyond just saying no," she says.

COMMON TRAPS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Trap: Assuming you've got to go along to get along

How you get snared: Pressure to perform and fear.

Avoid the trap: Don't make snap decisions. Buy yourself time to weigh what means the most to you and make sure you're not selling out for less. Go through a checklist. Ask yourself: What is making me feel uncomfortable? What am I giving up? What do I think I am going to get? Are there hidden costs?

Trap: Assuming your employer knows best

How you get snared: Not realizing even benign companies can develop blind spots.

Avoid the trap: Make your own diagnosis about every decision. Stop and ask, "Is this true, and do I want to go along?" Don't just sign off because a leader you respect has approved the decision.

Trap: Assuming you always know you're crossing a line

How you get snared: Research consistently shows humans are notoriously susceptible to self-justification and faulty perception. Studies of group dynamics, for instance, find that people can report seeing something different than what is actually in front of them when others in the group describe it differently.

Avoid the trap: Practice challenging your assumptions even if you feel comfortable with them to weigh whether there may be future consequences that may not be vivid now. Don't fall into an either/or choice.

Trap: Hoping someone else asks the question

How you get snared: Having an experience in which you or co-workers have been reprimanded in the past for challenging a company policy or a leader's directions can result in a decision to keep your mouth shut to avoid future trouble while hoping someone else speaks up and takes the potential heat.

Avoid the trap: Speak up, but phrase your concern as an offer to help and offer a positive alternative. The best approach is to sandwich a negative between two positives. Start by making the point that you consider yourself an ally and want to see the company succeed. That means you feel responsible to point out a risk you see that might affect success. Then offer a counter-strategy that meets the company's needs and is in line with your values.

Trap: Assuming there is no option but to fight back

How you get snared: Not looking at the fact there are other options but to lead with your ego and adrenalin.

Avoid the trap: Once you get angry, it can be easy to forget that there is more than one alternative. You will get the most open hearing and run the least risk of retaliation by coming into a discussion with an open mind and an offer of help to find an alternative that is a win for both sides. This should be a discussion about wanting to make the right things happen, not an ego battle.

Source: Elizabeth Doty, author of The Compromise Trap

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