



## THE COMPROMISE TRAP

### Overview of the Five Positive Plays

When you are under pressure, your fundamental choice is whether you are going to let others or historical precedent define your options for you – or redefine the game and choose to engage at a higher level.

Engaging at a higher level is like approaching from a higher altitude. From this vantage point, you have a broader perspective and can see larger consequences, a longer time horizon, and more creative options. You include higher values and goals, considering other people's interests as well as your own—not because you are a saint but based on seeing your own self-interest from the broadest possible perspective.

From the outside, this may seem to be a subtle shift, a slight change in what guides your decisions and how you take action as you respond to what is needed in the moment or pursue your professional mission or quest over time. What is constant is the emphasis on acting as a positive force and helping the right thing happen. I have identified five possible ways to take this sort of constructive action.

### Five Positive Plays

**1. Healthy compromise** If you decide that a compromise is worth the sacrifice and there is no better way to get what you really want, you may decide to go along. You need to make sure you are clear about what you are agreeing to, however, and clean up your other commitments so you don't set unhealthy precedents or betray others' trust.

**2. Candid conversations** Knowing that everyone occasionally avoids dealing with uncomfortable or difficult situations, one of the most important ways to help the right thing happen is to be willing to admit where you made a mistake, when you made an unhealthy compromise, or when you can no longer keep a commitment.

**3. Positive limits** When agreeing to a practice or request crosses a line for you or sets a dangerous precedent, you need to know you can say no in a constructive, effective way that does not invite retaliation or telegraph that you are not committed.

**4. Skillful influence** More proactive than simply setting limits, this involves initiating actions that contribute to addressing the root cause of the unhealthy pressure, or raising awareness of the need to do so, using (and building up) whatever influence you can while still taking care of your own real needs.

**5. Constructive exit** If the compromises required are too severe, you no longer have influence, or you cannot sustain yourself in a given setting, you may have to leave. If that's the case, the constructive approach is to leave in a way that makes as much positive difference as possible and to pursue your next engagement in a way that reflects what you have learned.



## Which Positive Play?

*These questions can help you identify the most effective positive play in response to whatever unhealthy pressure you face.*

- **What is my worthy enough win?** What risks, costs, or opportunities are important enough to be a reason for courage? What is important but not necessarily getting enough attention? Where would innovation help? What is the both/and question I am pursuing?

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- **What is within my control?** Is this a healthy compromise after all? If I agree to this, what side effects do I need to help manage? Are there ways I need to take responsibility, admit mistakes, or re-negotiate commitments or expectations? Where might I need to set a positive limit, either because of a bottom line or because it is the best way to influence? (Consider healthy compromise, candid conversations, and positive limits.)

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- **Where do I need to influence others?** Who could act differently for the best or right thing to happen? What would I propose or negotiate for? Who might also see the need or help raise the visibility of important considerations? Who might be able to help push the envelope on inherent tensions and trade-offs?

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- **What are my alternatives?** At what point would it be better to exit? How can I make the most positive difference as I go? If more-drastring measures are called for, how can I do so responsibly and support myself and my family in the process?

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- **How can I back myself up?** Whom of my allies shall I tap? Who deserves or needs to be involved? What support do I need?

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