



THE COMPROMISE TRAP

Ten Misconceptions about Compromise at Work

Most of us are pretty confident that we know how to tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy compromise. Yet a closer look reveals that it is harder than it first appears to separate constructive flexibility from soul-damaging concessions.

The ten misconceptions listed below surfaced during the research for [The Compromise Trap](#). They represent assumptions individuals once held and later questioned, or that social psychology and organizational studies suggest may not be accurate. Of course, you should test them against your own experience to see if the alternative propositions ring true enough for you to try them out.

Taken together, these ten misconceptions and alternative propositions are an argument for personal humility and preparation, and the constructive engagement of both leaders and followers in helping organizations maintain their integrity.

Misconception #1	Alternative Proposition
Compromise is always healthy.	Compromise can be unhealthy too.
<i>Compromise is unhealthy when you give up something more valuable for something less valuable, such as damaging a long-term customer relationship so you can win a sales award. This is what we mean when we say a military mission is compromised, or someone's health is compromised.</i>	

Misconception #2	Alternative Proposition
Good companies and leaders don't create unhealthy pressure to compromise.	Even good companies and leaders create unhealthy pressure to compromise.
<i>All leaders have blind spots and companies can compromise their commitments through inattention. One study showed that even in companies with a strong ethical culture, 24 percent of the staff surveyed observed at least one incidence of ethical misconduct within the prior twelve months¹.</i>	

Misconception #3	Alternative Proposition
Unhealthy pressure is the leader's fault.	Your own integrity can't depend on your leader's.
<i>The ultimate responsibility for your actions stays with you. In the well-known Milgram experiments (in which individuals were asked to help "teach" another person using electric shocks) subjects felt intense personal distress and regret afterwards, despite the fact that they were following instructions. They forgot that it was their responsibility to take back authority for their actions when the experiment became harmful.²</i>	

Misconception #4	Alternative Proposition
You have to go along to survive.	Going along can become a self-depleting trap – but there are much better options!
<i>Most people do not account for the full “costs of compromise” – the hidden charges that come along with betraying what matters to you, including the stress, the need to justify your choice, the invitation to other bullies, the loss of trusted relationships, and the costs of neglecting the core business issue. When you account for these, unhealthy compromise is a net drain on your well-being, deadening you and depleting your ability to generate value for your organization.</i>	

Misconception #5	Alternative Proposition
You’ll always know if you’re crossing a line.	Compromise is more likely to be gradual because blinders make it hard to see at the time.
<i>According to Max Bazerman, ethicist and negotiations expert at Harvard Business School, “Even good people sometimes will act unethically without their own awareness.” Numerous studies show this is true, due to biased and faulty perception, social dynamics, and natural human over-confidence.³</i>	

Misconception #6	Alternative Proposition
The company sets the terms.	More is negotiable than you think.
<i>Organizations operate more like social networks than strict chains of command. Decisions and policies are continually shaped and reshaped through daily interactions where followers influence leaders as well as other followers. This means that, though there are real risks, there is also room to get creative.</i>	

Misconception #7	Alternative Proposition
You should just say no.	You need more than a “just say no” strategy to be ready when the pressure hits.
<i>You do need to be ready and willing to say no at any time. Yet the main reason people fail to say no is they do not feel strong enough when the pressure hits. The real moment of choice is far upstream, when you build up the personal foundations that give you the independence and courage to do the right thing.</i>	

Misconception #8	Alternative Proposition
Refusing to compromise means fighting back.	Fighting is one option, but there are many other ways to influence a situation.
<i>It is easy to end up in a battle of egos that is more about being right than helping the right thing happen. If you have built your skills, you have several options in addition to fighting back – including candid conversations and skillful influence. The key is to choose the one that will yield the best outcome.</i>	

Misconception #9	Alternative Proposition
You thrive when you get to the top.	You may or may not thrive at the top; the key to thriving is being engaged in a meaningful pursuit that uses your talents and allows you to meet your real needs.
<i>Research in positive psychology shows that happiness mostly has to do with attitude, relationships, pleasure, and using your gifts and talents.⁴ This is good news because it means you don’t need to wait until you get to the top to thrive, and you don’t need to sacrifice quite so much to get there.</i>	

Misconception #10	Alternative Proposition
Individual integrity adds up to organizational integrity.	Organizational integrity is much harder to accomplish than individual integrity – yet it has a much larger impact.
<i>In any organization, the elements of a high-integrity decision lie in different people's heads, which means it takes much more to achieve trustworthiness than simply rooting out "bad apples". According to Lynn Sharp Paine, author of Value Shift, it takes seven different systems for an organization to reliably keep its commitments – and these systems are often poorly implemented or nonexistent.⁵</i>	

If you would like to follow these new ideas about compromise into action, here are several places to start:

To take stock of the personal foundations that allow you to stay true to yourself:

[Take the Personal Foundations Self-diagnostic](#)

To understand the types of pressure in your organization:

[Take the Organizational Pressure Diagnostic](#)

To learn how you and your organization can minimize the “costs of compromise:”

[Contact Us](#)

¹ Ethics Resource Center, *2007 National Business Ethics Survey: An Inside View of Private Sector Ethics* (Arlington, VA: Ethics Resource Council, 2007), pp. 9, 39.

² Arthur G. Miller, “What Can the Milgram Obedience Experiments Tell Us About the Holocaust? Generalizing from the Social Psychology Laboratory,” in *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, ed. Arthur G. Miller (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), p. 210.

³ Francesca Gino, Don A. Moore, and Max Bazerman, “See No Evil: When We Overlook Other People’s Unethical Behavior,” *HBS Working Knowledge*, January 11, 2008. <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/5839.html>.

⁴ See Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2004); and Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

⁵ Lynn Sharp Paine, *Value Shift: Why Companies Must Merge Social and Financial Imperatives to Achieve Superior Performance* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. 172.