leading**IDEAS**

Personal Ethics in the Corporate World
by Elizabeth Doty

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in the Corporate World

How to confront the moral tensions inherent in corporate life
and come out with your ethics intact.

by Elizabeth Doty

In today's high-pressure work environment, it is not unusual for conflicts to arise between our values as individuals and the compromises that we must make for our organizations. After interviewing people who had struggled to remain true to their personal values, I explored this dilemma in "Winning the Devil's Bargain," published in the Spring 2007 issue of *strategy+business*, and then discussed it in an *s+b online seminar*. The response to the seminar was so enthusiastic that there wasn't enough time to address all of the audience questions. Here, I take on some of the unanswered queries.

I am an instructor in a business school; my area of focus is sustainability and corporate social responsibility [CSR]. What do you think is important to convey to young people or students about developing the "bigger game"? How can they maintain a sense of realistic idealism?

The moment when we leave business school and enter the workforce is a crucial one. It's a time when we tend to squelch our own aspirations based on assumptions about making a living or on a difficult experience. Addressing this pattern is especially important as more companies embrace sustainability and CSR, so the inevitable challenges of institutions don't discourage us. That said, here are a few points to help those about to embark.

• **Figure out what your bigger game is.** It is probably a combination of what you believe needs to be done in the world and your particular strengths and preferences. In fact, I would almost say that wherever you see barriers, those are potential bigger games. Another ingredient of an effective bigger game is that you are likely to be able to meet your basic needs while pursuing it. This is about the long haul; it requires us to sustain ourselves, but not to sacrifice ourselves.

• **Don't expect a predefined path.** Too often people assume that the only valid paths are those that are well publicized. Once you find your bigger game, you will probably have to seek out the unique settings where you can pursue it. As one young person I interviewed said, "I'd really prefer to work on something that is of service. But they weren't recruiting for that."

• **Challenge the simplistic dichotomy of "good guys/bad guys."** Study what limits and enables organizations to live up to their aspirations, and learn about the crucial role of followers — so you don't become disillusioned when even the most inspired organization struggles to stay true.

• **Adopt an ongoing practice for broadening your thinking.** This was the source of continued growth and realignment for many of those I interviewed. Some examples of such practices could include reading books outside your area of expertise, giving yourself a "pulse

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check" every five years, or sustaining friendships with those in other spheres.

Would starting my own business help me avoid compromising my values?

Starting a business can be a promising solution for some of us, but we need to recognize the additional strains it creates. It does free us to be the architect of our own commitments and choices and theoretically to be truer to what we value. It allows us to craft innovative offerings, and can offer us the flexibility to pursue more than just money — especially if the company is private.

But starting a business also puts us in direct contact with the forces that probably led our prior organizations to their compromises. We must still engage with the larger business context as we obtain financing, hire employees, and market our products. Is our new cause so valuable that we feel justified in promising the investors whatever it takes to get the funding? Will our employees now withhold some of the truth out of deference to our authority? One dedicated leader who left the corporate world to run a small business described to me how challenging it is to remember our deeper beliefs in the midst of keeping a business alive.

I think the key is to remember that we are not inherently the good guys just because we start out with good intent. It takes a lot to evade the self-justifying tendencies that all of us confront. Knowing that, we may be just the ones who can meet the challenge of running a business while remaining true.

How can we as consultants help our clients make ethical decisions and not cross over to the "dark side"?

There is an important opportunity here that is not often named. As David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz described in "The Neuroscience of Leadership," [*s+b*, Summer 2006], the amount of attention we devote to something affects how strongly it plays out in our decision making. As consultants, we can envision ourselves serving as an active representation of our clients' larger perspectives and purposes — perhaps as a counterbalance to the threats and siege mentality that can accompany crises and obscure win-win solutions or hidden degrees of freedom. This can be as simple as asking questions from the perspective of a client's larger intent.

I also think consultants can serve as part of the support system that helps leaders keep their own score and draw meaning from efforts that perhaps no one else sees or that won't pay off for years to come. A colleague just told me a story about an executive who was struggling because his leadership efforts were not acknowledged (although they were received and acted upon). When my friend, who was this man's coach, asked him why he had gotten into the field in the first place, the executive described an inspiring mentor named George who had revealed his own bigger game. As they continued to speak about his need for acknowledgment, the coach said to him, "I imagine George would be tremendously proud of you right now." As simple as this confirmation was, the leader was visibly moved by it. Perhaps we all need a witness to sustain our efforts, and consultants may be able to help provide that.

About a year ago, I left the nonprofit world of social/human services for the for-profit world of corporate business. I still have difficulty in the shift. Will

this uncomfortable feeling ease or does this internal struggle continue?

I understand that must be challenging. I remember spending time with a nonprofit and finding it shockingly satisfying just to be able to name what I cared about without coming across as naive, foolish, or weak.

I'd suggest you consider several questions to clarify your intent and enable you to "write your own contract." What did it serve for you to enter the corporate world? What can you accomplish there that is worth your energy? What do you need to sustain yourself (all of yourself, not just materially), what is nonnegotiable, and how will you keep score on what matters to you?

You should also ask yourself whether the different perspective that you bring has the potential to make a contribution to that organization. What values do you share and respect, and where does the tension lie? People at the company may not see either. It'll take some skill, but you may be able to represent the differences in a constructive, nonjudgmental way that broadens others' sense of possibilities.

I suspect it may continue to be difficult, but if you are truly there to serve something you value, you can improve your situation by recognizing the challenge as worthwhile and being generous about lining up support for yourself.

What have we learned from WorldCom, Tyco, and Enron?

These most recent crises, coupled with observations from my interviews, suggest three patterns we might learn from.

First, although we can argue about what causes certain leaders to cross the line, followers clearly play a role in sustaining that direction. And I think our choice as followers is primarily this: Do we want to know? Yet as we become more and more dependent on an organization — financially and for our sense of achievement — it becomes increasingly difficult to let ourselves see. This is why I think it's so important to actively maintain our base of independence so we can be courageous when the time comes.

Second, I hope we loosen our assumption that the bad guys are somehow a completely different breed. In *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*, Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson show how, through the natural process of self-justification, we all have the potential to delude ourselves about the ways we may be causing

harm. "Whistle-blower" Sherron Watkins has said that "there's a little Enron in all of us." It's only when we recognize this that we'll create ways to talk to one another and sort out what we might be missing without rushing to judge and accuse.

Finally, I want to point out that although the resulting regulations, penalties, and controls have been cumbersome, I have heard several stories in which they gave people the support they needed to say "no." For example, a controller who was asked to sign a forecast she did not feel was accurate said, "No, I don't think so. I'm not going to go to jail for you guys." ✚

Resources

Ira Chaleff, *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up To and For Our Leaders* (Berrett-Koehler, 2003): Concrete advice for calling (and re-calling) leaders to their highest purposes. www.amazon.com/dp/157675247X/

Elizabeth Doty, "Personal Ethics in the Corporate World," *s+b Webinar*, 10/25/07: The online seminar that generated these questions, and many others; a recording of the event and a PDF of the presentation are available. www.strategy-business.com/webinar/webinar-ethics_in_corp_world

Elizabeth Doty, "Winning the Devil's Bargain," *s+b*, Spring 2007: When the business world compromises an individual's values, courage and climate can make all the difference. www.strategy-business.com/article/07101

Debra E. Meyerson, *Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003): A practical description of how individuals influence a company's culture and practices. www.amazon.com/dp/1591393256/

David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz, "The Neuroscience of Leadership," *s+b*, Summer 2006: Breakthroughs in brain research explain how to make organizational transformation succeed. www.strategy-business.com/article/06207

Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* (Harcourt, 2007): A study of the pervasiveness of self-justification, denial, and rationalization in a variety of settings. www.amazon.com/dp/0151010986/

Winning the Devil's Bargain Weblog: Elizabeth Doty's recently launched blog inviting discussion on these topics. http://devilsbargain.wordpress.com/

WorkLore Web site: Elizabeth Doty's company, with additional resources available. www.worklore.com/

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