Reasons and Rationalizations: An Exercise

Objectives

- To learn to unpack and reason through the most common and intractable of the arguments against ethical and responsible management.
- To practice generating responses to these common arguments.
- To introduce the 3 steps for responding to values conflicts:
  - Analysis and Generation of “Scripts”
  - Peer Coaching
  - Voiced Commitment

This exercise is about the barriers we confront when we encounter values conflicts in the workplace.

These barriers often appear in the form of “reasons and rationalizations” that can confound our best attempts to fulfill our sense of organizational and personal purpose. These are the objections you hear from your colleagues when you try to point out an ethical problem in the way things are being done. Or sometimes you don’t hear them because they are the unspoken assumptions of the organization.

It’s extremely difficult to make a strong argument against the “prevailing winds” if you feel in the minority; or if you don’t feel you have the time to come up with a workable alternative; or if you don’t want to take the chance to present a half-baked response. So today is about being in the majority, with plenty of time to come up with a fully-baked and pre-tested response to some of the most common challenges you are likely to face in your workplace.

These scenarios place you in situations where you need to make a choice and communicate it effectively. The scenarios begin from the assumption that you want to do what you think is right, but you need to know how to communicate powerfully and persuasively in the face of strong countervailing organizational or individual norms, reasons and rationalizations.

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1 The cases in this exercise were inspired by interviews and observations of actual experiences but names and other situational details have been changed for confidentiality and teaching purposes.
After reading the scenario, please work through the following questions:

- What are the main arguments you are trying to counter? That is, what are the **reasons and rationalizations** you need to address?
- What is at stake for the key parties, including those who disagree with you?
- What **levers** can you use to influence those who disagree with you?
- What is your most **powerful and persuasive response** to the reasons and rationalizations you need to address? To whom should the argument be made? When and in what context?
Case #1

Maureen works as an engineering manager in the Product Group for a leading computer systems company. She recently learned, through informal conversation with some of her colleagues, that the firm’s single-wipe hard-drive reconfiguration process is failing 5% of the time. This means that customers can be purchasing reconditioned hard-drives that still have the previous owner’s data on them. She and her colleagues speculate that it could cost upwards of $5 million to address this glitch with the reconfiguration process, so no one really wants to name or “own” the problem. After all, there have been no complaints outside the company and this has probably been going on for at least 6 months.

Still Maureen is uncomfortable. She is worried not only about meeting the expectations of customers who have paid for a clean system, but also about the violation of privacy of the previous owners of these systems. It’s just not a product situation she can feel good about.

Ideally, Maureen would like to get her colleagues to take the concern up the organization together with her. She thinks it will have more impact that way. On the other hand, no one wants to be the one to break this news. Especially since there have been recent cutbacks, money is tight, and no one wants to have to charge more against their group’s expenses. At least for now, it feels to folks in her group that “ignorance is bliss.” And no one expects to be thanked for calling attention to the problem. The question is: who will be blamed if it surfaces?

What should she say, to whom, when and how?

Discussion Questions

- What are the main arguments you are trying to counter? That is, what are the reasons and rationalizations you need to address?
- What’s at stake for the key parties, including those with whom you disagree?
- What levers can you use to influence those with whom you disagree?
- What is your most powerful and persuasive response to the reasons and rationalizations you need to address?
Case #2

Jeff is proud to manage the highest performing sales team in his computer hardware company. His group focuses on institutional end-users and has led the firm for almost two years now. Jeff took over the group 9 months ago and is pleased and relieved that they have been able to continue the winning streak under his leadership.

Nevertheless, lately he has been finding himself losing sleep over an ever growing list of questionable practices he had begun to notice. He recognizes the intense pressure his folks are under to meet and even exceed their numbers – pressures that come from the company, on the one hand, and from the intense personal competitiveness that his salespeople bring to their jobs on the other. And then there are the bonuses, and the desire to please, and thereby retain customers.

Nevertheless, over the past few months, as he becomes more familiar with his staff and their routines and as they come to trust him more, Jeff sees evidence of activities that worry him: sales representatives who override the sales reporting systems in order to get the customer the price he or she wants (Jeff heard about this one from a colleague in operations who was complaining about unrealistic demands.); reps who interact inappropriately with customers (for example, Jeff has heard rumors of reps sharing pornography via the company e-mail), in order to win their loyalty; reps who over-promise or who use special promotions inappropriately in order to seal the deal (again, rumors); reps who submit unrequested credit financing applications for their customers in order to get the associated bonus (in this instance, one of the administrators processing the request approached Jeff because the paperwork looked fishy to him); etc.

Jeff is concerned about these practices for many reasons, but he is also worried about messing around with a winning formula. He wants to clean up his shop but doesn’t want to undermine the motivation and competitive spirit of his staff.

What should he say, to whom, when and how?

Discussion Questions

- What are the main arguments you are trying to counter? What are the reasons and rationalizations you need to address?
- What’s at stake for the key parties, including those with whom you disagree?
- What levers can you use to influence those with whom you disagree?
- What is your most powerful and persuasive response to the reasons and rationalizations you need to address?