



LEADERSHIP & LEARNING: A DESIGN MEDIA DISCUSSION FORUM

**Learning and Leading in the Workplace:
"Business Ethics: Corporate Conscience or Personal Conscience?"**

Featuring Peter Thigpen

A handout from Mr. Thigpen's Presentation
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Common Rationalizations

We judge ourselves by our best intentions, our noblest acts and our most virtuous habits. But others tend to judge us by our last worst act. So in making tough decisions, don't be distracted by rationalizations. Here are some of the most common ones:

If it's necessary, it's ethical.

Based on the false assumption that necessity breeds propriety. Necessity is an interpretation not a fact. But even actual necessity does not justify unethical conduct. Leads to ends-justify-the-means reasoning and to treating assigned tasks or desired goals as moral imperatives.

If it's legal/permissible, it's proper.

Substitutes legal requirements (which establish minimal standards of behavior) for personal moral judgment. Does not embrace full range of ethical obligations, especially for those involved in upholding the public trust. Ethical people often choose to do less than they are allowed to do and more than they are required to do.

I was just doing it for you.

Primary justification of “white lies” or withholding important information in personal or professional relationships, especially performance reviews.

Dilemma: honesty and respect vs. caring.

Dangers: violates principle of respect for others (implies a moral right to make decisions about one's own life based on true information), ignores underlying self-interest of liar, and underestimates uncertainty about the other person's desires to be “protected”. (Most people would rather have unpleasant information than be deluded into believing something that isn't so.)

Consider the perspective of persons lied to: if they discovered the lie, would they thank you for being considerate or feel betrayed, patronized, or manipulated?

I'm just fighting fire with fire.

Based on false assumption that deceit, lying, promise-breaking, etc. are justified if they are the same sort engaged in by those you are dealing with. Also gives rise to the Do-Unto-Others-Before-They-Do-Unto-You corollary.

It doesn't hurt anyone.

Rationalization used to excuse misconduct based on the false assumption that one can violate ethical principles so long as there is no clear and immediate harm to others. It treats ethical obligations simply as factors to be considered in decision-making rather than as ground rules. Problem areas: Asking for or giving special favors to family, friends or politicians, disclosing nonpublic information to benefit others, using one's position for personal advantages (e.g. use of official title/letterhead to get special treatment).

It can't be wrong, everyone's doing it.

A false "safety in numbers" rationale fed by the tendency to uncritically adopt cultural, organizational, or occupational behavior systems as if they were ethical.

It's OK if I don't gain personally.

Justifies improper conduct done for others or for institutional purposes on the false assumption that personal gain is the only test of impropriety. A related, more narrow excuse, is that only behavior resulting in improper financial gain warrants ethical criticism.

I've got it coming.

Persons who feel they are overworked or underpaid rationalize that minor "perks" or acceptance of favors, discounts, or gratuities are nothing more than fair compensation for services rendered. Also used to excuse all manner of personnel policy abuses, e.g. sick days, insurance claims, overtime, personal phone calls or photocopying, theft of supplies, etc.

I can still be objective.

Ignores the fact that a loss of objectivity always prevents perception of the loss of objectivity. Also underestimates the subtle ways in which gratitude, friendship, anticipation of future favors, and the like affect judgment. Does the person providing you with the benefit believe that it will in no way affect your judgment? Would the benefit still be provided if you were in no position to help the provider in any way