



Moral Courage in the Workplace

By Nancy Capistran, PCC, CPC

Leadership is about doing the right thing even if no one else knows about it – even when it is terrifying and uncomfortable. A company’s culture can shine, or it can hide behind ethical misconduct. Illegal or unethical behavior at work can have serious consequences if unaddressed. Speaking up about a serious issue in the workplace may be viewed as disloyal because it can easily turn into an explosive minefield. Turning a blind eye is not high principled, but it allows us to remain uninvolved. We all have choices when it comes to whether or not we compromise our ethical values. Smart leaders stay true to their code of ethics by mobilizing their moral courage and leading by example.

A high-potential leader in corporate America that I was working with was asked to enhance a special “pet” project that had huge revenue potential. He was excited to be given the opportunity to lead the expansion of this “sleeping giant.” Unfortunately, while doing his due diligence, he uncovered a fatal flaw in the process: a significant legality issue was revealed that required that either meaningful changes be made quickly to the program, or it be shut down completely. Ceasing operations would mean the loss of this revenue stream. Based on his research, this violation could cause the board of directors to go to jail. As his coach, I had numerous conversations with him about how best to move this intense situation forward. Once he had completely digested the gravity of this compliance issue, his integrity would not allow him to keep these details to himself.

As the exceptional leader that he was, he felt that it was his responsibility to not only make sure that the appropriate people were aware of the violation, but to also provide a legitimate solution to keep the program going. Significant changes would need to be made to transition the program into compliance, but it could be done if the desire was there. He presented his findings to the corporate attorney who was responsible for this program. The attorney was shocked to hear what my client’s research had uncovered. The attorney told my client that he was uninformed about his allegations, but that he was deeply concerned. My client presented him with three choices: the attorney could bring up the issue with the executive in charge of this program himself, they could collaboratively raise the issue together, or my client would undertake things on his own. The inhouse attorney decided that my client should be the one to not only present his findings, but to also relate the extensive plans to resolve the issue that my client had laboriously created.

The work that my client and I had done together had taught him that if he needed to challenge someone or something, he needed to have at least one potential solution to bring forth. He requested a meeting with the senior vice president of sales to share his findings. This executive was well known for “blowing a gasket” when things weren’t going his way. The news that my client had to share was less than favorable, which meant that he was going to be on the “hot seat” and that a full interrogation would ensue.

Opening Pandora's box is nothing short of intense. To be fully prepared, I encouraged him to double- and triple-check all of his research as well as the presentation itself. I also advised him to check in with himself right before he walked into the meeting to make sure that he was composed emotionally. As anticipated, the senior vice president erupted like a volcano. My client told me later that he had embedded in his thoughts to never treat anyone the way he was treated at that moment – such condescension and disrespect – especially when my client was trying to do what was best not just for the company, but also for the senior vice president's career. After all, this catastrophe occurred on his watch. The senior vice president chastised my client: "Who do you think you are?" His tongue-lashing continued with the reminder that my client wasn't an attorney, and that the company had an entire legal team who were responsible for finding any improprieties that might exist. My client explained that he was not trying to be an attorney, nor was he trying to step on anyone else's toes. His actions were based on living and breathing the code of values that the company had established, and because of that he felt that it was important to bring forward the problem and offer some possible solutions. My client shared that he had stumbled upon his findings purely by accident and queried, "Do you really think I would come to you with such a serious situation if I wasn't 100% sure? Doing that would be self-sabotage and career-altering." He added that he had already spoken with the attorney who was responsible for this program, and even he was unaware of the infringements that my client had uncovered. The senior vice president's response was that he had a hard time believing my client's findings.

The next morning, my client's attendance was requested at a meeting with the general counsel and a few key executives. On some level, my client was grateful that things were coming to a head because he had been losing sleep over the matter ever since the initial discovery. Though he wasn't second-guessing his decision to bring this crucial information forward, he was perplexed as to why he was the one being verbally abused. He was feeling very uncomfortable. Not only had he found the problem, but he was trying to bring awareness to the proper internal authorities while also trying to fix the compliance issue. I gave my client a pep talk. Even though what he was doing was extremely stressful, he was doing the right thing. I knew that he had been raised with strong values. Though he was scared and intimidated by what was taking place, I believed that he could muster the courage and the strength to see this through to the best of his abilities, even if it meant losing his job. He was bound and determined to not compromise his values and beliefs.

He sat across from the general counsel and shared specifics about all that he had unmasked. When he was done, the general counsel put his face between the palms of his hands, shook his head back and forth and said, "He is right. We need to shut this program down ASAP," – and they did just that. The attorney who was responsible for this program lost his job shortly thereafter.

Once we "peel back the onion" and find errors, intentional or not, they need to be escalated to the level within the organization where the proper decisions can be made to correct these flaws.

Moral consciousness needs to be amplified during all management decisions: from the company vision, to the mission, to the code of conduct, to the work environment, to expectations, and even to goals. The most important wisdom is learned and earned through experience. We profit not only from our own mistakes, but also from observing and improving our minds through the mistakes of others. Those who rely upon our leadership take cues from us. C-suite executives need to be on the frontlines of their company culture. This influential position creates healthier human intellectual achievement to master

conditions of advanced growth. When the going gets rough, leaders need to focus and leverage their guiding principles by finessing their vision to inspire others to excel.



About the Author: Nancy Capistran is a best-selling author, an award-winning, internationally certified executive coach, motivational speaker, and trusted advisor. She is Principal of [Capistran Leadership, LLC](#), and [Crisis Interception, LLC](#). Nancy's best-selling international leadership book: [Open Your Eyes and LEAD](#) shows readers how to become a positive force in the world and how to balance and manage omnipresent tensions while striving for leadership excellence. Capistran shares inspirational stories and advice from her 30+ year career to help both seasoned and emerging leaders develop intentionality while maintaining their core values and beliefs even when life's pressures dictate otherwise.