



Paul's Leadership Tips

Chief Paul H. Stein

paulhstein@aol.com

ETHICAL DECISION MAKING IN THE WORK PLACE

Scenario: You are a new officer and just finished your shift. One of the firefighters' scheduled to work today has called in sick. You have him replaced. On the way home you stop at the local home supply store to get some gardening supplies. On the way out of the store you see the firefighter who called in sick. He has a load of wood that he is returning to the store. What would you say or do, if anything?

This hypothetical scenario of workplace dilemma arises often and the way it is handled could have a major impact on one's career and personal relationship as well as on the vital twin assets of reputation and credibility.

Recently society has been deluged with bad decisions by talented, multi-millionaires like Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, Brittany Spears, Lindsey Lohan, and a parade of politicians, priests, police officers, firefighters, corporate executives and college coaches.

And it's not only the bad people who make bad decisions. If we are not vigilant, any one of us can find ourselves compromising our principles in a moment controlled by impulses like self-indulgences, fear, self-interest or ambition. Good intentions and moral rhetoric is no match for a strong temptation and our capacity to rationalize. We must fortify our moral aspirations and our ethical leadership with both discipline and good judgment.

Most will say the firefighter you saw at the home supply store made a poor decision. Some would say it's no big thing. It happens all the time. Some would say it wasn't the right thing to do but take no action and some will say it wasn't the right thing to do and take action. I believe most of us would say the firefighter made a poor and unethical decision. When he was observed at the home supply store he and you were put in an uncomfortable situation. He abused the department sick leave policy and probably violated the departments' rules and regulations. His decision could lead to some type of discipline. And the reality of the decision is-- it was just not right.

How do you feel about the firefighter's decision and what would you do about it? Let's imagine you were the off duty Captain that saw the firefighter at the home supply store. You decided not to confront the firefighter or mention this incident to anyone else.

On your next duty day your Battalion Chief calls you into his office and informs you that both you and the firefighter who called in sick were seen at the store. He indicated he is trying to gather facts and wants to know what you know about the incident. What do you tell him?

Would you cover-up? (Such as Watergate and President Nixon.) Sometimes the cover-up ends up being worse than the underlying offense.

The bottom line is each of us can be as ethical with our decisions as we are willing to be. We need to think about our decisions in terms of simply right or wrong, how it impacts relationships, our credibility and our reputation. My mother use to tell me to stop, and look both ways before I cross the street. That is also a good thought to have before making a decision. We should stop, think, and ask ourselves if we are making a good choice. The following are some

questions to ask ourselves.

- Is my decision in line with the organizations mission statement?
- Will my decision affect others?
- Is there another option?
- Could I jeopardize important relationships?
- Is it the ethical thing to do?

It's often said that our choices reveal our character. It is also said our choices shape our character. In turn our character shapes our destiny.

So, how would you define character? I believe that character is simply ethics in action. Successful leaders focus on building a sustainable ethical culture that nurtures and promotes integrity, competence, accountability, respect and discourages dishonesty and encourages trust and respect. I believe the officer of character would say something to the firefighter at the home supply store.

This is certainly easier said than done. There is no such thing as the perfect fire officer or perfect firefighter. We all make mistakes. We say and do things we regret. The important thing is that we learn from the mistakes we make. Sometimes emotion and ego get in the way of changing the unrewarding decision and course we are traveling and we keep right on trucking and digging a deeper hole. We kind of "cut off our nose to spite our face."

There are those who rationalize poor behavior as to why it wasn't their fault. Examples of this is the firefighter who fails a promotional exam then blames the exam maker, or the department has it out for him/her, or the exam was developed for a favorite child. How about the lazy firefighter who comes to work to rest or to just do the bare minimum? He/she rationalizes this behavior in his/her own mind and lets us all know about it. Most of us will just listen and not challenge the unacceptable rational of the complaining firefighter. People of character will not let this rationalization slide. Organizations of character would also not let this behavior go unnoticed.

This is such a vital point. Everywhere we see evidence that we're becoming a nation of unaccountable victims, whiners, and wimps all too ready to pass off responsibility to someone else.

Satirist Ambrose Bierce poked fun at this tendency when he defined responsibility as "a detachable burden easily shifted to the shoulders of God, Fate, Fortune, Luck, or one's neighbor." The parade of recently indicted CEO's added a new object of blame to this list ("It was the people who worked for me!") as they claimed to be victims rather than perpetrators of frauds that enriched them.

Everywhere we turn, we see people blaming personal shortcomings and social ills on circumstances beyond their control or on an irresponsible media, greedy businessmen, corrupt politicians, irresistible economic pressures, and every manner of psychological syndrome. Yes, and even poor fire department leadership. The bottom line is each of us can be as ethical with our decisions as we are willing to be. We need to think about our decisions in terms of simply right or wrong, how it impacts relationships, our credibility and our reputation.

*VIVI BENE--LIVE WELL
RIDI SPESSO--LAUGH OFTEN
E AMA MOLTO--LOVE MUCH*

