



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

Twisted leadership safety ethics

When principles are compromised under pressure

Ethical decision-making is innate to most safety and health pros. For many, it is one of the core reasons they entered the profession.

Can the same be said of the leaders they work for?

The speed, magnitude, and complexity of change in today's global business environment create significant pressures (meeting unrealistic goals or deadlines, etc.) on corporate CEOs and their senior leadership. Leaders use this "pressure" to rationalize cutting back on safety and health. This rationalization leads to what I call *Twisted Leadership Safety Ethics*.

There is a difference between an unethical safety leader and one who occasionally falls prey to twisted leadership safety ethics. The former has no principles or values to begin with; the latter allows his principles to be compromised under pressure. In either instance, both exhibit similar characteristics.

Unethical leading indicators

Dr. Daryl Green¹ provides insight into identifying unethical leaders. I have taken a bit of editorial license to present Green's traits from a safety perspective:

- Leads with a bad safety attitude;
- Lies to his safety professionals, followers and his peers;
- Takes advantage of his safety professionals and followers;
- Takes personal credit for the safety group's accomplishments;
- Uses politics to gain power in an amoral manner;
- Does not focus on the common safety good of the organization;
- Does not support his safety professionals or his followers;



- Displays a "double-tongued" safety behavior— talks the talk;
- Sacrifices his safety professionals and followers for personal gain;
- Fails to model the safety way for his followers.

Have you been approached?

How do you muster the courage to follow your own ethical principles or values and defy unethical behavior of someone in authority? Kristin Ketteringham² offers the following approach:

First and foremost, keep your mouth shut.

Assuming the unethical behavior could create unsafe conditions or injuries, document names, dates, actions and any other supporting evidence regarding the superior's unethical behavior. If there are witnesses, try to meet with them away from work to discuss your concerns.

After gathering evidence, compose a business-like letter using neutral words and submit it with your evidence to higher-ups. If necessary, ask that your name remain confidential.

Be mindful that going down this path frequently has consequences that may include finding a new job.

Richard Nielsen³ presents 12 intervention strategies you can choose from to

address unethical behavior in an organization:

- 1 — Secretly blow the whistle within the organization;
- 2 — Quietly blow the whistle, informing a responsible higher-level manager;
- 3 — Secretly threaten the offender with blowing the whistle;
- 4 — Secretly threaten a responsible manager with blowing the whistle outside the organization;
- 5 — Publicly threaten a responsible manager with blowing the whistle;
- 6 — Sabotage the implementation of the unethical behavior;
- 7 — Quietly refrain from implementing an unethical order or policy;
- 8 — Publicly blow the whistle within the organization;
- 9 — Conscientiously object to an unethical policy or refuse to implement the policy;
- 10 — Indicate uncertainty about or refuse to support a cover-up in the event the individual and/or organization gets caught;
- 11 — Secretly blow the whistle outside the organization; or
- 12 — Publicly blow the whistle outside the organization.

Case study

Jack was a powerful business director of a highly profitable product. Jack ran into his manufacturing superintendent, Doug, at a local watering hole on Friday. Jack told Doug he could double his bonus if he would increase production by 30 percent. Doug knew the only way to do it was to cut corners and ignore safety procedures.

After thinking about Jack's proposition over the weekend, Doug met Jack in his office on Monday morning and told

him his crew was producing as much product as they could and he was not going to compromise the safety of his crew to meet Jack's request (Strategy 9 — Conscientiously object to an unethical policy or refuse to implement the policy).

Jack was furious. He told Doug he would decrease his bonus for his insubordination at his next annual review, several weeks away. Rather than confront Jack, Doug called several manufacturing superintendents at other plant sites where Jack's product was manufactured. Learning his colleagues had been offered the same proposition and were as upset as him, Doug spoke to Jack's boss, Evelyn, about the situation

(Strategy 2 — Quietly blow the whistle to a responsible higher-level manager).

Doug's superintendent colleagues called Evelyn also to relay their experience with Jack. After catching Jack in several lies, Evelyn recommended he enter the company's coaching program. Jack eventually resigned from the company.

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1 Green, D. 2010. Spotting the Unethical Leader in 2010. At <http://ezinearticles.com/?Spotting-the-Unethical-Leader-in-2010-&id=3545565>.

2 Ketteringham, K. 2008. How to Deal with an Unethical Boss. At http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/911837/how_to_deal_with_an_unethical_boss.html?cat=3.

3 Nielsen, R.P. 1989. Changing Unethical Organizational Behavior. *The Academy of Management EXECUTIVE*. 3(2): 123-130



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