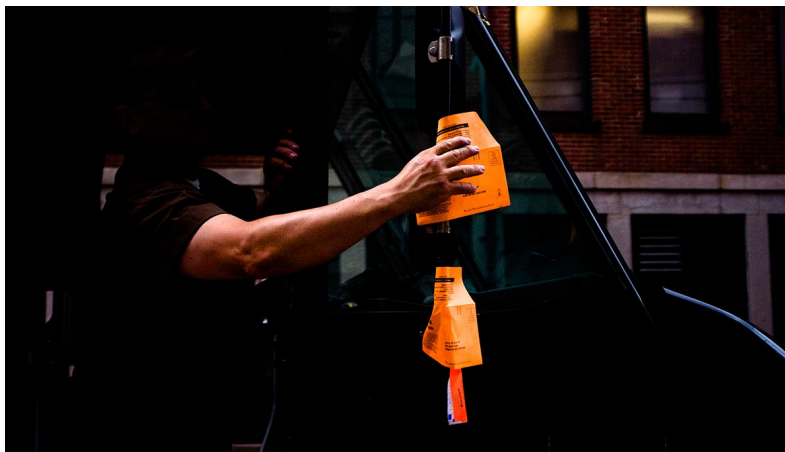


Managing Conflicts

What to Do If Your Boss Asks You to Break the Rules

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January 07, 2016



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All of us, at some point or another, are asked to break the rules at work.

It may be a small action, like rounding up or down in an accounts ledger, or a small inaction, like looking the other way while others do so. It may be a one-time request, like when one of us was asked to alter some documentation on a patient in a hospital we worked for. Or it may be a norm, like when we were encouraged by the nursing staff at the same hospital to sign in for other employees who were absent. It may be no big thing: hey, rules are made to be broken, right? Or it may be a big thing: think Volkswagen, Enron, and WorldCom.

When asked to break the rules at work, most of us experience conflict. Particularly if we are new to a job, low on the totem pole, highly dependent on the position, or wishing to make a good impression, we face a tough choice. Do we go along to get along or do we resist? How we address such disputes can have serious consequences for our organization and ourselves.

The standard advice on conflict management suggests we try to find win-win solutions whenever possible. But these tactics fall flat when faced with disputes of an ethical, moral, or legal nature.

Like when your superiors...

- Are cheats or crooks;
- Harass you or others;
- Put workers or consumers unnecessarily at risk for injury;
- Block all opportunities for fair recourse to express grievances;
- Encourage illegal or immoral activities, or;
- Cover up wrongdoing or ask you to do so.

How might an ethical but job-dependent employee respond to these disputes effectively?

We recommend an approach we call *principled rebellion*. This is an active and deliberate choice to rebel at work incrementally and strategically to minimize harm with maximum integrity. It entails learning how to say no, systematically and sequentially, by slowly turning up the heat on those in charge. Here are some tactics, gleaned from the literature on political activism, presented in sequence from low to high heat.

1. **I'm concerned about you.** The first step should be to appeal to the self-interest of those in charge. It's possible they are unaware of the implications of what they are suggesting. So exploring their requests, framing them in terms of the potential costs and implications *for them*, is a good way to test the waters. This also signals your discomfort and gives them a way to quietly withdraw their demands without losing face.
2. **Appeal to their better angels.** Most of us like to believe that we are essentially decent people. We hate the dissonance we feel when we become aware that our behavior is inconsistent with our best selves. Emphasizing what seems fair and decent, particularly if those in charge are caught up in their more banal intentions, can help to increase their dissonance.
3. **Just say no.** If 1 and 2 don't work, then it is best to quietly refuse. If what you are being asked to do is sufficiently unethical, immoral, or illegal, then your sincere refusal may be enough to worry or intimidate them into backing off and reconsidering their demands.
4. **Just say no louder.** When this doesn't work, it's time to turn the volume up by bringing in others. This can mean speaking with friends and colleagues and getting their advice and support. If this is not possible without putting them in jeopardy then it might be time to blow the whistle *inside*. This could entail speaking to your supervisor, or if the dispute involves her or him, speaking to that person's superiors, an ombudsman, or someone in human resources.
5. **Broadcast no.** When tactics 1–4 don't work, it is time to consider blowing the whistle *outside*. This is big and is likely to have serious consequences for you and others. Researchers have found that whistle-blowers are more likely to be effective if they: have high credibility within the organization, forgo anonymity and identify themselves at the outset of the proceedings, if the organization is not highly dependent on the

wrongs being enacted, and if the evidence of the wrongdoing is convincing and clearly illegal.

6. **Increase your numbers.** Another tactic is to change the power dynamic at work by gathering allies. This might mean organizing several people from a department to go to a manager together to express concerns, or something as massive as when workers from Walmart organized labor demonstrations and strikes in twenty-eight stores across twelve states to protest the company's retaliation against workers who spoke out.
7. **Oppress the oppressors with their own ideals.** Saul Alinsky once wrote, "Since the Haves publicly pose as the custodians of responsibility, morality, law and justice (which are frequently strangers to each other), they can be constantly pushed to live up to their own book of morality and regulations." He cites examples of entire neighborhoods showing up at local banks accused of discriminatory lending practices to open savings accounts with one dollar and then returning to the back of the line to close the same account. This is now active noncooperation, which may very well backfire unless a full strategy has been developed and is implemented carefully.
8. **Take power.** If all else fails, it may be time for direct legal action. This tactic, obviously, is the most costly. But it should always be considered a last-stand BATNA; a backup plan should all else fail.

George Bernard Shaw wrote, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

Principled rebellion is a strategy for being rationally and systematically unreasonable at work when absolutely necessary.

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