



# Book The Compromise Trap

## How to Thrive at Work Without Selling Your Soul (Bk Business)

Elizabeth Doty  
Berrett-Koehler, 2009  
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## Recommendation

How do good people lose their moral compass? Elizabeth Doty interviewed business professionals and drew on her own experiences as a corporate consultant to find out. She concluded that some people fall into the “compromise trap,” yielding to unhealthy pressure exerted at even the best companies. Doty explains that you must develop personal resources that allow you to stay true to your values. She recommends finding a higher purpose, a beacon, to steer you away from making decisions that conflict with your beliefs. Doty’s “key concepts” and “individual and group activities” provide practical exercises for integrating her theories into your day-to-day behavior. *BooksInShort* recommends this book if you’re feeling compromised, wrestling with a moral dilemma or seeking expertise in business ethics.

## Take-Aways

- The “compromise trap” occurs when you make detrimental compromises in response to unhealthy pressure.
- People feel that they need to “play the game” to get ahead.
- “Redefine the game” by letting your values guide your behavior and actions.
- Standing by your values, despite pressure, requires a strong “personal foundation.”
- “Reconnect to your strengths” by learning how to access your innate talents and values.
- Instead of using the “just say no” strategy, offer alternatives and emphasize that you want the company to succeed.
- An accurate, realistic view of every situation allows you to “see the larger field.”
- A goal that evokes passion and resonates with your values is a “worthy enough win.”
- The five “positive plays” that facilitate “constructive action” are “healthy compromise, candid conversations, positive limits, skillful influence” and “constructive exit.”
- Measure success by how well your professional behavior aligns with your values.

## Summary

### The Nature of Compromise

“The compromise trap is the gradual erosion of vitality, passion and confidence that occurs when you deal with unhealthy pressure by playing along...and compromising in unhealthy ways.” When you play this game, you may make what you believe are minor concessions to obtain a greater goal. Yet if yielding goes against your closely held principles, conceding may prove harmful and demoralizing. Most people feel that the price of standing up against the tide of company pressure is too dear. Still, the costs of caving in are as high. You pay with your health, credibility and self-esteem. Redefining the game allows you to act with integrity by pushing back, confronting

difficulties, making tough decisions and finding positive alternatives.

**Elizabeth Doty** is the founder of WorkLore, a coaching and leadership development consultancy which specializes in helping leaders increase engagement, alignment and integrity by keeping their commitments real.

Jim was excited about his new job as sales director for a floor covering company. The company sold a line of green products that didn't use harmful chemicals or end up in landfills. But once onboard, Jim discovered that the company also sold broadloom carpeting, a primary landfill offender, and expected Jim to sell it, too. Jim felt misled and compromised. He tried to correct the problem within the company, but met with passivity and vague promises. To keep his job, Jim made an "unhealthy compromise," sacrificing a core belief for a paycheck.

"The whole world changes when you decide not to cave out of fear."

All companies pressure their employees. This pressure can be "healthy" or "unhealthy." Healthy pressure motivates employees to reach admirable goals such as reducing unnecessary costs to increase profits or providing excellent service to customers. It leads to compromise that sacrifices something of "lower value" to attain an objective of "higher" merit. That is "healthy compromise." Unhealthy pressure, however, can push employees to erode their values over time in the face of requests to carry out activities that make them uncomfortable, such as misleading customers or tweaking sales figures. "Unhealthy compromise" makes employees forfeit something of value, such as integrity or family time, for something that's not worth the sacrifice, such as a promotion.

"Concern over status is a common reason why people conform or get caught up in comparisons and hypercompetition."

Unhealthy pressure originates from internal and external sources. External pressures may include a noxious company culture, unscrupulous managers, unrealistic goals, and faulty products or procedures. Your drive to succeed creates internal pressure if it leads to flawed behavior, such as gossiping, cheating or lying. In Western cultures, people often feel they need to "play the game" to get ahead. This might mean keeping your thoughts to yourself rather than speaking out against a bad idea or policy, or it could mean participating in cutthroat office politics.

"Every time you cross a line or betray a commitment, you take a bite out of your self-respect, your confidence and your passion for what you are doing."

Most compromises are subtle. Company culture encourages people to conform to certain thoughts and behavior. Employees who attempt to swim against the tide risk having managers label them as rebellious, contrary or uncooperative. This happens even in the best of companies. If everyone at your firm works evenings and weekends, you risk being tagged as lazy or unmotivated if you leave work before others. So you compromise, sacrificing your family time and relationships.

"When you are caught in the compromise trap, it feels as though you are selling pieces of your soul but with very few other viable alternatives."

Instead, "redefine the game": Keep what matters to you foremost, letting that guide your behavior and actions. When you view events in this positive manner, you will "engage at a higher level." Faced with a tough situation, you will draw from your strengths and stick to your values. You will use your creativity and talents to find alternative solutions.

## The Price You Pay

Over time, unhealthy compromises, big and small, create unhealthy stress. When your actions do not align with your principles, you pay a price. You may feel creatively blocked, emotionally drained or bullied. You fall back on rationalization and "tune out" the incongruity between your home and work life. You become hyperfocused on achieving your goals – hoping that the rewards will justify the means – and you abdicate your decision-making ability to others.

"You can redefine the game by staying, leaving or doing something in between."

### The fall into the compromise trap progresses through five stages:

1. **"Signing up"** – You start a job with good intentions, willing to cooperate and adapt.
2. **"Getting hooked"** – You enjoy positive reinforcement: promotions, raises and recognition.
3. **"Getting stuck in the cycle"** – You don't want to threaten your investment in your job by rocking the boat.
4. **"Hitting the limit"** – You reach a crisis point that makes you question your actions.
5. **"Freeing yourself"** – You review your options and consider other choices.

"When you consider the costs of compromise, you clarify what is at stake."

How can you avoid the compromise trap? Knowledge is the best weapon. Start by understanding some common misconceptions. One fallacy is that compromise is necessary for finding and agreeing upon solutions. Although this is often true, compromise is never appropriate if it requires you to betray a deeply held value. People assume that good companies do not exert unhealthy pressure or force poor choices. Sadly, even the most well-intentioned enterprises can fall short. Moreover, you can't relinquish the responsibility for correcting a bad situation to management. Regardless of your position, speak up. The consequences may not be as dire as you fear. Instead of using fiat – the "just say no" strategy – try a softer approach by offering alternatives and emphasizing that you want the company to succeed. Bring about change from within by using your influence, position and knowledge.

## Game Changers

Once you learn how to identify the compromise trap, you can free yourself to "engage at a higher level." Be purposeful and pragmatic. When you challenge the system, the system actually benefits. Socio-economic research supports the theory that "families, organizations, teams, individuals, and even societies can grow and evolve as they gain a critical mass of awareness of what is not working and invent new options in an ongoing process of change." You can bring about productive engagement through constructive negotiation, frank and honest communication, and the adroit use of influence. It helps to draw ethical lines that you will not cross. Finally, if you are

in a damaging situation that you cannot change, be willing to walk away.

“The fundamental assumption when you dare to engage at a higher level is that people and systems can learn.”

Standing up to unhealthy pressure and engaging at a higher level is not easy. It requires a strong “personal foundation” based on the following six elements:

## 1. “Reconnect to Your Strengths”

To counter unhealthy pressure and stress, draw upon your inner resources. These include your unique talents, beliefs, creativity, ingenuity and communication skills. Unfortunately, deleterious work imposes a strain. Its demands can make accessing these resources more difficult, especially when you need them most. However, carrying out certain practices helps you connect to your inner strengths. Put yourself in the right frame of mind by finding triggers that activate your capabilities and values. For example, one manufacturing manager posted pictures of his family beside his desk because he wanted to do good work so he wouldn’t let them down.

“When you take that risk, what you get back is soul.”

What experiences can you draw upon to connect with your strengths and talents? Recall a situation in which you acted admirably. Feel the emotions you experienced in that situation. The next time you feel challenged, use this experience to motivate you to do what’s right. Access your inner assets over the long term by implementing routines and practices that connect you to your core values and abilities. Frequently find activities to carry out that boost your mind, body, and spirit, so you can face adversity with strength.

## 2. “See the Larger Field”

Work that is focused on meeting specific goals can narrow your vision. This degree of concentration can blind you to encroaching realities and their consequences. Let the outside world in; try to adopt a broader perspective. Acknowledge and accept unpleasant realities, such as unhealthy work pressure, so you can ask the right questions and make the right decisions. No industry is immune to the conflicts caused by the need to achieve fixed goals. Identifying these contentious “hotspots” allows you to dodge short- and long-term ethical pitfalls. To avoid unhealthy compromise, ask yourself five questions:

1. “What am I being asked to do or go along with?”
2. “What do I have to gain?”
3. “What would I be giving up?”
4. “What are the hidden ‘costs of compromise’?”
5. “Is this a healthy compromise?”

## 3. “Define a Worthy Enough Win”

A worthy enough win is a goal that evokes your passion and resonates with your values. With this win in mind, you can focus on a long-term commitment rather than an immediate gain. Working toward a greater good imbues your day-to-day duties with a higher purpose. When you set your sights on a worthwhile goal, you will speak out with less fear of the consequences. Your drive and enthusiasm will influence those around you to join your pursuit. Define your mission by asking what truly matters to you. Once you know the answer, you’ll find the courage to stick by this principle regardless of what’s at stake. This may lead you to explore your “professional quest,” the work that gives your life meaning. Pursuing a professional quest allows you to operate at a higher level, as it influences your practical decisions and helps you resolve contradictions.

## 4. “Find Your Real Team”

Surround yourself with supportive, positive people. If you don’t have a strong back-up system, you’re more likely to conform to the culture around you. To thwart unhealthy pressure, develop a real team, a network of allies that reinforces the best in you and the best decisions for you. Your family, your extended family, your friends and the people you interact with professionally form your network. This backup system provides a sounding board that helps you weigh your options, challenge your assumptions, set your priorities and stay true to your values. Your professional network can help you identify opportunities, obtain information and connect with like-minded people. Sharing your dreams and long-term goals with the people closest to you can provide clarity as well as reinforcement. For example, when Gary wanted to cut back on his work hours to concentrate on his music, he was surprised that his wife totally supported the change. She wanted him to be happy and had his best interests at heart.

## 5. “Make Positive Plays”

You want your company to do the right thing, but you also want to protect yourself. Promote positive change by focusing on the outcome rather than any need to achieve a personal triumph. Gain people’s trust, use your influence constructively and bring allies into the fold. Use these five positive plays to facilitate “constructive action”:

1. “**Healthy compromise**” – Forfeit something of less value to reach a higher goal.
2. “**Candid conversations**” – Accept responsibility. To initiate change, speak openly and honestly about challenging issues.
3. “**Positive limits**” – Know your boundaries; stay within them without making others feel defensive or aggressive.
4. “**Skillful influence**” – Exert gentle, selective pressure to attain your goals.
5. “**Constructive exit**” – When you must leave, set a positive precedent with your exit.

## 6. “Keep Your Own Score”

Judge yourself by your own definition of success rather than by external metrics. Relate your success directly to how well you align your professional behavior with your

value system. Validation from within or from your trusted network will make you less vulnerable to unhealthy pressure. Boost your efforts with support from like-minded allies. Set a benchmark that you can work toward so you feel that you are progressing in your quest. Lastly, as trite as it may seem, count your blessings. Being appreciative and acknowledging the good things in your life will sustain you in troubled times and replenish your resolve when you face difficulties.

## About the Author

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