

## Going Sideways

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The supervisor wanted the guy fired. He even smiled when he said to me, "I know the law. I want you to figure out a way around it."

That's been years ago, when I was a newbie Human Resources manager, but I still remember his smug tone and my surge of negative reactions: anger, frustration and righteous indignation. I don't recall the outcome of that particular situation because there were too many battles over his relentless attempts at unfair, spontaneous dismissals. I moved on, accepting a promotion with another company. The last time I bumped into him, he was pleading his own unemployment claim after being terminated from a different company. Karma, perhaps?

Nobody should have to choose between a paycheck and their moral values. The conflict wears down the health and morale of workers while reducing the organization's productivity. When properly managed, conflict can actually be worthwhile, leading to creative solutions. But, let's face it, most of the time, controversy takes on a life of its own that escalates into turnover, customer dissatisfaction, legal fees and damaged reputations.

Surprisingly, most people I've known who were tempted to take unethical steps, started out with the best intentions. (Even the aforementioned supervisor who was trying to improve his team's performance, but going about it badly.) Pressure is often the driving force behind why good people go sideways and misplace their moral compass.

Who doesn't make mistakes when under pressure? Companies can help alleviate unintended negative consequences of undue pressure by setting appropriate goals while still maintaining high standards. Ron Carucci, business consultant, offered insights in his 2016 *Harvard Business Review* piece:

- **Unrealistic Goals:** Pressure to reach unrealistic goals fosters tunnel vision, rewarding achievement over decency. Instead, goals should incentivize and stretch, while being realistically attainable and within boundaries.
- **Conflicting Goals:** Ever take a toy away from a child and give it to another? It invokes the same feelings of injustice when a budget is cut in a thriving region and provided to a territory that has not earned it. Researchers Maureen Ambrose, Mark Seabright and Marshall Schminke indicated a "direct correlation between employees' sense of fairness and their conscious choice to sabotage the organization."

Balance must be achieved in setting and reaching goals. And, while missing sales or production goals is disappointing, giving into pressure and going sideways on issues of integrity is true failure.

Shannon Warren is Founder/CEO of [www.okethics.org](http://www.okethics.org)