



BUCKING THE SYSTEM



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Introduction

I started writing this paper roughly 30 years ago in response to a *Harvard Business Review* article by the late Kenneth R. Andrews, *HBR*'s long-time editor.¹ In his article, adapted from the introduction to his book bearing the same title², Andrews suggested that management was responsible for ensuring ethical behavior in an organization. I disagreed then and now. "Ethics in practice" is everyone's responsibility, not just that of management. Indeed, putting the responsibility for ethical behavior solely on management's shoulders is likely to lead to more ethical breaches, not fewer.

But I didn't finish the paper at the time. Instead, I wrote Andrews a letter suggesting that in lieu of burdening management with yet another responsibility, a better course of action would be for the B-schools and other educational establishments to do a better job of teaching young people how to fight back, how to "buck the system" when appropriate. He expressed interest and asked for some examples of "bucking the system." I sent him some but never heard a word after that. I suspect he was somewhat taken aback by the examples I sent him.

Now, I am finishing the job I started 30 years ago. I'll take the same angle of attack I took in my letter to Andrews: I'll tell some sea stories about ethics in practice and fighting back or "bucking the system." But first permit me a bit of social commentary.

The Rise of James Bond and the Decline of Moral Values

Whether or not we agree on all the particulars, I think it is safe to say that many if not most of us here in the United States would agree that this nation suffers from a decline in moral values. For me, the decline in moral values that plagues this nation began in 1964, with the first James Bond movie, *Doctor No*.

There is a scene in *Doctor No* in which Bond, played by Sean Connery, murders an assassin in

cold blood. Bond, of course, is the redoubtable Agent 007, on her majesty's service and licensed to kill. I remember shaking my head as I left the theater, muttering to myself, "We're in for it now. There's no difference between the bad guys and the good guys." A few years later, the incident at *My Lai* confirmed my judgment. There have been many more incidents since then – in the military and in the civilian sector.

The specific moral code toppled in that first James Bond movie was the prohibition against shooting an unarmed man. The assassin's gun was empty; he had emptied it into a bed thinking Bond was in it. Bond, however, sat in a chair behind the door to his room. From it, he calmly, coolly, murdered his would-be assassin. The shooting of unarmed men, including prisoners, has apparently become quite acceptable (or perhaps it always was and the prohibition against shooting unarmed men was a pleasant fiction). The most recent incident I can recall occurred in another movie: *Saving Private Ryan*. There, toward the end of the movie, a member of the squad sent to save Private Ryan shoots a German soldier who had been let go earlier in the film and who later fought again, killing a member of the squad. Upon being captured for the second time his capturer, the member of the squad who had pressed for his release earlier, shoots the German soldier in cold blood. The audience cheered. Oh well, so much for the Geneva Convention.

But this treatise is not about movies or murder or murderers. It is about management and morals and the exercise of ethics. It is about our individual, personal code of conduct as it plays out in the organizations where we spend much of our waking life. It is about "ethics in practice." It is most of all about fighting back and, when and if necessary, bucking the system. Let us begin with a brief look at the notion of a code of conduct and move on to some examples of how one person's code of conduct played out in a variety of organizational settings.

Code of Conduct

A code of conduct is a set of ethical standards, yardsticks against which the goodness of behavior can be compared. A code of conduct prescribes

¹ Andrews, K. R., "Ethics in Practice." *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1989.

² Andrews, K. R., *Ethics in Practice: Managing the Moral Corporation*. Harvard Business School Press (1989).

and proscribes behavior. It is concerned with what is right and wrong in human conduct.

The elements in a code of conduct might be stated in terms of things one *should* do, as in “Honor thy father and mother” or things one *should not* do, as in “Thou shalt not kill.”

The *Ten Commandments*, of course, comprise a code of conduct. So does the golden rule: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (*Matthew 7:12*).

Granted, there are differences in what people deem polite or impolite, proper or improper and socially acceptable or unacceptable. But these are superficial differences. At the core issue of what is right and what is wrong there is remarkable congruence across time, culture and religion. Consider, for example, the Golden Rule as it is found outside of Christianity:

- From Judaism’s *Talmud*: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellowmen. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.”

- From Brahmanism’s *Mahabharata*: “This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.”

- From Buddhism’s *Udana-Varga*: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”

- From Confucianism’s *Analects*: “Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness: Do not unto others that you would not have them do unto you.”

- From Taoism’s *T’ai Shang Kan Ying P’ien*: “Regard your neighbor’s gain as your own gain, and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.”

- From Zoroastrianism’s *Dadistan-i-dinik*: “That nature alone is good which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself.”

- From Islam’s *Sunnah*: “No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.”

Given this almost universal view of at least one aspect of human conduct and assuming there are others, how then does one account for the seemingly pervasive lack of ethics in human conduct all throughout our ever-shrinking global community, particularly in organizations and even more particularly in business? Is it simply that “business is business” and there is no place in it for ethics? Is “business ethics,” as someone once observed of “military intelligence,” an oxymoron? Probably not, for even among thieves there is honor. Is it that life in organizations is somehow exempt from the codes of conduct that govern our lives elsewhere? What accounts for wholesale bribery, graft, fraud, corruption, falsification of records, the marketing of dangerous materials and products, chicanery, shady practices, pollution, exploitation and downright criminal activity?

Some say religion has failed. Some attribute it to the breakup of the family. Some assert that education no longer does its job. Still others claim that greed is rampant. And some say simply that the structure of incentives and disincentives in business is dominated by short-term economic considerations and that these force unethical and even illegal behavior on the part of otherwise honest and honorable people. I think it is true that people succumb to pressure. But I also believe they succumb because they don’t have any viable alternatives. If they had ways of fighting back, of resisting without having to sacrifice everything, I believe the frequency and the seriousness of ethical and legal lapses would decrease.

All organizations, not just the military, are possessed of a hierarchy of authority. On occasion, that hierarchy can crush the spirit of individual members. People are told early in life that it’s futile to “buck the system,” that it’s easier and safer to “go along to get along.” I suppose that’s true for the most part but there are times in life when fighting back against the system of authority in which we are all bound up from time to time is the sanest and, in the end, the best thing to do – for

both the individual and the organization. And so it is my aim in this paper to tell a few “sea stories” related to management and morality, to illustrate a variety of ways of fighting back, of resisting the pressure to engage in unethical, illegal, immoral or just plain questionable behavior. These “sea stories” are drawn mainly from my experiences in the United States Navy plus a couple from my career in the civilian world as well.

The Idea Thief

Some people, in adhering to the prohibition against stealing, seem to make strange distinctions between material and intellectual property. Such people wouldn’t dream of taking a penny that isn’t theirs. but they will copy software, download music, copy CDs or steal an idea faster than you can blink your eyes. For them, “Thou Shalt not Steal” has a postscript: “Unless.”

A young Navy petty officer, a Fire Control Technician second-class (FT2) whom we’ll call Roger, came up with a rather ingenious way of improving an operational aspect of the radar that was a central component in his ship’s gun fire control system. The Chief in charge of the system helped Roger write it up as a formally proposed modification to the system so it could be submitted through official channels. The aim was not simply one of gaining recognition for Roger but also of ensuring that the proposed modification would receive appropriate attention and, if approved as a modification to all such radars, its benefits would be enjoyed throughout the fleet.

One night, while perusing the contents of the in and out baskets in the ship’s weapons office, the Chief came across Roger’s recommendation – all neatly typed and ready to go out in the mail. A rather startling change had been made. The originator of the change was now identified as the ship’s Fire Control Officer (FCO) and the cover letter bore his signature instead of Roger’s. Incensed, the Chief tore up the letter and the recommendation, and threw both in the wastebasket.

The next day, the FCO stormed into the plotting room that served as the nerve center of the ship’s gunnery system with the torn documents in hand, demanding to know who had destroyed them. The Chief informed the FCO that he had

done so. The FCO ordered the Chief to his stateroom whereupon he threatened the Chief with all manner of dire consequences, including a reduction in rank. The Chief tossed his CPO hat onto the FCO’s bunk and said, “Here, you’re welcome to it” and walked out.

Later that day, the ship’s Weapons Officer showed up in the plotting room with the Chief’s hat in hand and wanted to know what was going on. The Chief told the Weapons Officer his side of the story. The Weapons Officer looked at the Chief in amazement and then gave the Chief his hat back and told him to forget the whole thing. Three weeks later, the idea thief was transferred.

It is worth adding that the proposed modification to the radar was shortly thereafter submitted under Roger’s name and it was subsequently approved as a modification for all such radars.

The Computer is Down

Sometimes, circumstances conspire in such a way that your sense of what’s right and wrong gets tested in rather severe ways. Such circumstances can put you in a devilishly difficult situation and pit you against the entire establishment.

In August of 1968, while the Chicago police were clubbing demonstrators outside the Democratic Party’s national convention, the United States Navy was pounding the Viet Nam coast with naval gunfire. One such shore bombardment mission entailed blowing up an orphanage.

Intelligence reports suggested that the Viet Cong might be using the orphanage as an observation post. The purpose of the shore bombardment mission was to confirm or disconfirm that suspicion. In the aerial spotter’s words, he intended to “throw a few rounds in there and see what we can flush out.” Judging from the spotter’s southern accent, those present concluded he was a “good old boy” who thought he was on a quail hunt.

Up in the Combat Information Center (CIC), the Fire Control Officer (not the same fellow as before) pointed out that the target coordinates given the ship showed on the ship’s charts as a Catholic orphanage, an observation the spotter confirmed. Obviously reluctant to undertake the mission, the Fire Control Officer asked the spotter what he could see. The spotter replied, “Nothin’

but a bunch of kids and what looks like nuns. But you never can tell. They could be VC.”

Down below, in the plotting room, home to the gun fire control system’s computer and the place from which the ship’s guns were controlled, the Chief in charge was growing antsy. He recalled the Nuremburg trials and the excuses offered by Nazi officers that they had simply obeyed orders. He also recalled the chief legal counsel’s admonition to the Allies that not allowing such a defense would one day come back to haunt them. Uppermost in his mind was a belief that it was wrong – criminally wrong – to knowingly slaughter children on the basis of mere suspicion.

The mission proceeded toward its explosive outcome. Coordinates were set into the computer; the gun orders were calculated; the guns were swung out and loaded; the ship reported ready to the spotter. Just as the spotter gave the command to fire, the Chief reported to CIC, “The computer just went down.” Efforts to resolve the problem dragged on for hours. Eventually, the mission had to be aborted.

Later that night, after the computer was reported back in operation, there were rumors circulating to the effect that the computer hadn’t really been down, that the Chief had only reported it as down. The Chief was summoned to the Captain’s sea cabin where he was asked about these rumors. The Chief pointed out that he had no control over the rumor mill. More important, he was the only person on the ship qualified to say if the computer was or was not operating properly. If he said the computer was down, it was down, and he said it was down.

The next day the spotter from the day before was back and the orphanage was once again a target. This time the skipper refused to take it under fire.

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell

What’s fair is fair and what’s right is right. One mark of an ethical person is the ability to restrain one’s personal preferences in the exercise of sound professional and positional judgment.

A young fellow we’ll call Bill was serving on board a destroyer and was suspected by all who knew him of being gay. But, as Bill made no un-

toward advances toward anyone else, no action was taken. “Live and let live” is an eminently sensible doctrine, especially on board a warship.

One day the Chief to whom Bill reported was summoned to the executive officer’s stateroom. Another young fellow from the same division had leveled a formal accusation that Bill was a homosexual and the executive officer (X.O.) was about to initiate the paperwork necessary to have Bill discharged.

Drawing himself up to his full five and a half feet, the Chief sternly inquired of the accuser if he had been molested. The answer was no. Had he been witness to any homosexual behavior? Again, the answer was no. After several similar probing questions, the Chief finally asked Bill’s accuser, “Are you a homosexual?”

Angry, the accuser snapped, “Hell no, what do you think I am?”

“A damned liar,” the Chief responded.

The Chief then suggested to the X.O. that it might prove difficult to discharge Bill on such flimsy evidence. Apparently, the X.O. agreed because the matter was dropped. Two years later, Bill received his honorable discharge and went on to become a very prosperous real estate dealer in the city of Long Beach, California. To this day no one involved in the incident knows for sure whether Bill was or wasn’t gay. More to the point, no one cares.

Dumping the Skipper

I was on a ship once that, until the end of my time on board her, was one of the best ships I’d ever served on. Then, toward the end, everything went to hell in a hand basket. The upshot of it all was that the crew dumped the skipper.

The new skipper had been deep selected, promoted early in the larger scheme of things, and given command at sea. No doubt under a great deal of pressure, he was out to prove something – at the crew’s expense.

He wasn’t simply a “hard-nose” or even a martinet. He was a gold-plated jerk. He took command while the ship was in the shipyard for its scheduled three-year overhaul. Right away, he let everyone know who was boss; he worked the crew mercilessly; he cancelled liberty; extended work-

ing hours; violated rules and regulations; and, in general, displayed a level of arrogance and hubris I've not seen before or since. He was also certifiably stupid. He was destroying the very thing he needed.

His objective was to make a name for himself. He was out to prove to his superiors that they had exercised sound judgment in promoting him early and giving him command of a ship of the line without having first proven himself in the kinds of assignments that typically preceded command at sea.

What amazed all who watched him was that he was doing the exact opposite of what a truly capable commanding officer would do; namely, avoid screwing things up. You see, the ship in question was a high-performing ship. She was sporting the battle efficiency E with three hash-marks (meaning her next qualification would bring her a gold E); her fire control director also sported an E with three hashmarks; in addition, she had the red Engineering E with two hash-marks and the green Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) E with two hash-marks. In short, she was a high performer. Many of her crew had been on board for four years or more; unusually long tours but telling in terms of her performance. A smart commanding officer would have taken stock of all this and said, "Please, Lord, help me keep from screwing this up." Instead, this guy set out to prove to the higher-ups what a great commanding officer he was.

Well, to make a long story short, when the shipyard period was over, we went out to sea and took part in all the competitive exercises that determine a ship's qualifications and standing. When they were over, every E was lost. We not only didn't qualify for the E, we failed the exercises. The crew had concluded the commanding officer (C.O.) had to go and the best way of dumping him was to dump all the E's.

Not long afterward, while we were waiting to go through refresher training again and take part in the competitive exercises again, the boneheaded skipper was relieved of his command. The new skipper took stock of the situation and promptly did the right thing: He asked the crew to help him restore the ship to her former glory – a mission we all took immediately to heart.

Blowing the Whistle - Anonymously

Ensuring and enforcing ethical behavior isn't just a "top down" problem. It's often done from the bottom up too. "Policing the action" from the bottom typically has to be done with more care than from the top but it can be and is done.

A Chief Petty Officer (CPO) was walking down the hall in one of the Navy's brand-new human resource management centers when a young petty officer named Tom, a Storekeeper (SK), collared the Chief and asked if they could talk.

Initially, Tom wanted to know why it was that his reward for doing such a good job was to get more work piled on him. His officemate, a real slacker and one who did a lousy job whenever he did anything, increasingly had less and less to do. The Chief gave Tom three reasons for his predicament: 1) it was partly his own fault for doing such a good job, 2) the Supply Officer was anxious to make sure the work got done properly so he assigned it to Tom, and 3) the Supply Officer was probably some combination of stupid, lazy and uncaring.

Satisfied on that score, Tom then broached his real reason for collaring the Chief. The commanding officer was letting a sole-source consulting contract, something that was not within the C.O.'s authority to do. Tom had raised the matter with his superiors but had been told to mind his own business. He was troubled that he was being ordered to do something that was against the rules.

The Chief pointed out to Tom that he was bound only to obey legal orders and, if he wanted to make a big fuss, he could probably torpedo the contract. But, Tom had it in mind to make a career out of the Navy and he didn't want the kind of black mark on his record that making a big fuss would create.

So, the Chief advised him to blow the whistle anonymously, to make copies of the offensive documents and send them to the admiral in Washington, D.C. who headed up the program, along with an equally anonymous explanatory note, preferably typed on someone else's typewriter. Tom did as the Chief suggested and shortly thereafter the sole-source contract was cancelled.

Dixie Cups! Dixie Cups!

Frankly, there is so much going on around you in most organizations that you can't possibly take on the task of confronting each and every instance of meanness, sleaziness, injustice or even outright crookedness. There comes a point, however, when enough is enough. In some cases, you go for the jugular. In most organizations this means ousting the offending party.

The case of the sole source contract convinced the Chief that it was time to be rid of the consultant in question. She had a Svengali-like hold on the center's commanding officer and she had systematically eliminated or neutralized any and all who might oppose her; specifically, all four of the Navy officers on the staff at the center who also held PhD's.

The Chief had even been called to the base one Saturday morning to be witness to the emasculation of one of the PhDs, a friend of the Chief's. The alleged crime of the Chief's friend was that he had failed to adequately translate the esoteric jargon of HRD into practical terms for the commanding officer and, as a consequence, he was being relieved of his post as special assistant to the C.O. His replacement, to no one's surprise, was an officer who was one of the consultant's staunch supporters and the boyfriend of one of the consultant's girlfriends.

The consultant had a nasty habit of asking members of the staff to serve as co-facilitators in the race relations seminars she ran. These seminars were intense, borderline T-groups or sensitivity training. Once the seminars were underway, she would unfailingly turn on her co-facilitator and, figuratively speaking, disembowel him. It is not coincidental that she was black and the co-facilitators she set up were all white male officers and white male Chief petty officers. With few exceptions the staff of the center both hated and feared her. No one dared cross her.

The Chief in question had not been asked to co-facilitate one of her seminars. But now, resolved to be rid of her, the Chief volunteered. She accepted then later cancelled. The new special assistant to the C.O. warned her that the Chief was after her scalp and she preferred to catch her vic-

tims off guard. Besides, the Chief was as good at what she did in those seminars as she was. To her, he represented a lose-lose proposition.

The consultant's Achilles' heel was her perception of the relationship between the enlisted men and the officers. She saw them as literally stacked one atop the other, a rigid, vertical, layered hierarchy. The Chief tried to explain to her one day that the relationships between the ranks were more akin to stacking Dixie cups one atop the other. He used that analogy as a way of trying to get her to understand that, although the enlisted ranks were indeed subordinate to the officer ranks, the top of the enlisted ranks was in fact in very close proximity to the top of the officer ranks. She pooh-poohed the Chief's observation, claiming that his view was pretty much what she would expect from an enlisted man who thought too much of himself.

So, the Chief got a fresh haircut, spit-shined his shoes, put on a freshly laundered set of khakis, tucked his Chief's hat under his arm and knocked on the door of the Commander who was the center's operations officer. Glancing up from his desk, he smiled and said, "Yeah, Chief, what can I . . ." He stopped in mid-sentence because he could see right away that the Chief's appearance was much more military than was the normal state of affairs in what was a deliberately egalitarian and informal unit where officers and enlisted addressed each other on a first-name basis. Changing gears quickly, he sat erect and said, "Yes, Chief. How can I help you?"

Standing at attention, the Chief informed the commander that he was making an official call as a Chief Petty Officer concerned about the morale of the command. When the Chief pinpointed the consultant as the source of his concern, the commander sat back, gave the Chief a long, serious look and then asked the Chief, "What would you have me do?" The Chief replied, "Nothing on my word alone, Commander. All I ask is that you check it out with the rest of the crew." Mindful (and reminded) of his responsibilities, the Commander did as the Chief requested and, before long, the consultant was fired.

Dixie cups! Dixie cups! She just didn't get it.

Enforcing the Rules

A Chief Petty Officer (CPO) reporting to a new command was surprised to learn that the Senior Chief Gunner's Mate was not the ship's Chief Master-at-Arms (CMAA). Instead, a Master Chief Machinist's Mate was the CMAA. Navy Regulations was quite clear on the matter of the CMAA. The CMAA was an assignment to be held by the senior "deck" rating, which included Boatswain's Mates, Signalmen, Quartermasters, Gunner's Mates and Fire Control Technicians to name a few. "Deck" ratings did not include engineers or "snipes" (Machinist's Mates, Boiler Tenders, Damage Controlmen, etc.).

After a few days of getting acquainted, the new Chief asked the Senior Chief Gunner's Mate why he wasn't the CMAA. The gunner's mate replied that the Executive Officer (X.O.) and he didn't get along. And the Master Chief Machinist's Mate was the X.O.'s fair-haired boy. The new Chief asked the gunner's mate why he didn't push for the assignment. The gunner's mate responded that he had enough trouble and saw no reason to add to it.

The new Chief went to see the X.O. and asked why the Senior Chief Gunner's Mate was not the CMAA. He was, after all, the senior deck rating aboard. The X.O. replied that (a) it really wasn't any of the new Chief's business but (b) for what it was worth, the X.O. and the commanding officer were agreed that the Senior Chief Gunner's Mate was not up to handling the duties of CMAA. Besides, the X.O. added, the gunner's mate didn't want the job.

The new Chief begged to differ with the X.O., saying that it was very much his business because he was the next senior deck rating on board and if the gunner's mate didn't want the job, the Chief very much wanted it. Moreover, the new Chief had plenty of previous experience as a Master-at-Arms and there was nothing in his service jacket that could be used to deny him the assignment.

The X.O., annoyed, brushed off the new Chief's comments, saying that he and the C.O. would assign whomever they wished as CMAA. The new Chief replied that Navy Regulations was quite clear on who would be assigned as CMAA

and that he, the new Chief on board, meant to press that issue. Two days later, in accordance with Navy Regulations, the Senior Chief Gunner's Mate, as the senior deck rating aboard, was appointed CMAA.

A couple of months later, the new Chief was surprised when his request to transfer to the Fleet Reserve for retirement purposes was approved without the command first requiring a relief to be on board. He brought this up in a discussion with the Senior Chief Gunner's Mate who was now the new Chief Master at Arms. The Senior Chief laughed and said, "You don't get it, do you? They're afraid of you. They think you're a spy from Washington, D.C."

My Way or the Highway

After retiring from the Navy and early in my civilian career, I was struggling to build my consulting practice and had landed a small but important contract with a large telecommunications corporation. Work was proceeding nicely and my client, John, was quite satisfied. During the course of a visit to the client's facilities one Friday, I was asked to stop by and see one of my client's peers, a fellow we'll call Dave.

Dave, an ex-priest, informed me that he had another, much larger project in mind and he wanted me to take it on. I expressed interest but Dave said there were some preliminaries to be worked out. Dave's budget wasn't big enough to fund the project in question, so he was arranging to have some other projects cancelled and the funds transferred to his budget. One of the projects to be cancelled was John's, the one on which I was currently working. Dave wanted me to promise that I wouldn't make a fuss when my project was cancelled. As my reward, I would be awarded the new, much bigger contract.

I asked about the nature of the new project, which Dave explained (and which I immediately concluded was a very dumb idea). I asked what would happen if I didn't go along with his maneuver. Dave indicated that John's project would be cancelled anyway, and I would have no work. It was Dave's way or the highway. I then asked how long I had to decide. Dave said he would call me the following Monday for his decision.

My business partner and I spent much of the trip home and the weekend discussing the situation. She was concerned about losing what was currently our mainstay project. I was concerned about that, too, but I was more concerned about Dave's character. I was convinced I wanted nothing to do with him. I was also quite angry at Dave's blatant attempts to manipulate me into going along with his maneuver.

When Dave called on Monday morning, I told him that I would not make a fuss over cancellation of the current contract, but I would not take on the new project. Dave would have to find someone else.

Dave exploded. "What! You can't do that! We studied you. We know you need the money! We might not be able to get this project authorized if you don't agree to do it."

Further incensed by Dave's comments, I told Dave to shove the project and hung up.

The small project on which I had been working was soon cancelled and Dave did find another consultant to take on the bigger project. As I had concluded earlier, it was indeed a dumb idea and it did not turn out well.

As my partner predicted, the loss of the small project brought on hard times. Our consulting business was leading a hand-to-mouth existence. Debts were mounting. Then, about six months later, the phone rang. It was another manager from another part of the same organization where Dave worked.

"Are you the guy who told Dave to shove it?" asked the caller.

"Yes," I replied, wondering what the call was about.

"Good," said the caller. "We've got some work that needs doing and we think you're just the guy to do it."

A Botched Hatchet Job and a Counter-attack

Sometimes, the breaches of ethics are very public and very visible. A case in point concerns a review of Tom Peters' and Bob Waterman's

book, *In Search of Excellence* that appeared on the pages of the *Harvard Business Review*³.

I wrote the *HBR* editor a five-page letter repudiating each and every point made in the review. That was easy enough to do; the review was full of half-truths, misquotes, and what I considered to be outright fabrications, including some so-called quotes that were actually "doctored." I won't rehash that event here, but I will explain why I wrote the letter in the first place.

I was a consultant to AT&T's corporate human resources development department at the time, and we were wrestling with the rather knotty problem of how to stir the thinking of managers who proudly confessed to having heads that were "bell-shaped." Originally, our efforts were part of a project aimed at the lofty goal of "managing in a changing environment." But shortly after we got started, Charley Brown, head of AT&T, capitulated to the Justice department and divestiture was a looming reality. We had to scramble.

In the course of our scrambling, we came across Tom Peters who at the time was working on the galley proofs of his soon-to-be best-selling book, *In Search of Excellence*. We arranged to have Tom make a presentation in the "Greek Theater," the executive presentation room at the AT&T Basking Ridge headquarters. I was absolutely floored by his presentation. Here was a guy standing up and saying the things I believed. Better yet, he was a big-time consultant, straight out of McKinsey and, at the time, on the faculty of Stanford. A colleague of mine and I arranged to videotape Tom's entire three-hour presentation, then edited it down to a tight 60-minute videotape, wrapped it up in some discussion segments and took it on the road. It was a hit, too.

Then, in December of 1983, I was invited to attend and address the last of the AT&T HRD symposiums, held in Atlanta. There, a division manager handed me a copy of the *HBR* review and told me that the senior officers at AT&T were concerned that the HRD people were carrying Tom's message to the rank and file. Their concerns owed to the perceptions that the *HBR* was

³ Carroll, D. T., "A Disappointing Search for Excellence." *Harvard Business Review* (November-December 1983).

taking a dim view of his book. After glancing through the review, I immediately noted two things: 1) this was the first five-page book review I had ever seen in the *HBR*, and 2) the review was and is, in my opinion, a badly botched hatchet job.

I prepared my own five-page, point-by-point, paragraph-by-paragraph rebuttal of the review and sent it to the editor of the *HBR*. I also distributed copies to the editors of *Business Week*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *People* magazine, Tom Peters, Bob Waterman, the author of the review, and AT&T's HRD department.

No more complaints were heard at AT&T. I heard nothing from the reviewer or the *HBR*'s editor or the other editors to whom I sent my letter. Tom Peters and Bob Waterman both sent me nice thank you notes. And I heard from someone in London I didn't know – Roland Mann, founding editor of the *McKinsey Quarterly* and then director of publications for McKinsey. Tom had sent him a copy of my letter. Mr. Mann complimented me on “thoroughly mopping up the floor” with the review and then closed his letter with a comment that to this day I still do not fully comprehend: He said I had “struck a real blow for freedom.” All I know is that *In Search of Excellence* received short shrift on the pages of the *HBR* in a manner that, to borrow some words from Kenneth Andrews' article, I would characterize as exemplifying ethical “dereliction” and “sleaziness.”

We Will Do Nothing Illegal or Unethical

Not everything is glum when it comes to ethics and integrity. There are situations in which ethics and integrity are clearly in control. I was once privileged to watch an illustrative little drama play out once and it's a tale worth telling.

I had the assignment of “cleaning up” a client company's service center operations. The goal was to make them more productive. As luck would have it, I had to make a presentation regarding my effort at a meeting of the senior officer cadre. But my presentation was cut short because a thorny ethical issue was raised.

In a hurry to roll out a new financial services product, several corners had been cut and some more were about to be cut, a few of which had ethical if not legal overtones.

The CEO of the company listened to all the arguments for and against cutting the corners, including counsel from Chief Counsel who advised him that he could probably “get away with it.” Finally, the CEO asked the only person who had not yet voiced an opinion his view on the matter. The person in question, the executive vice president for operations and administration and the CEO's chief advisor, said simply that he did not think cutting corners of any kind was a wise move.

The CEO then announced in a tone and with emphasis that left no doubt, “We will do *nothing* illegal *or* unethical.”

I have often wondered what would have happened if the president had instead said, “We'll chance it.”

Conclusion

What have these little “sea stories” been about? What's their point? I'll try to sum up my answers.

You don't have to roll over; you don't have to go along with the program; you don't have to look the other way. You can fight back; you can buck the system; you can play by the rules and still win. Indeed, sometimes, playing by the rules is the only way to win. It's always the best way to win.

Even in the military, especially in the Navy, that most hide-bound of the armed forces, you are bound only to obey legal orders. You can't be ordered to commit a crime. Well, on second thought, I take that back. You can indeed be ordered to commit a crime, but you don't have to obey such orders. Just be very careful in how you go about disobeying them.

Many people take an impoverished view of organizations; they see themselves as little bitty cogs in a great big machine. Or they see themselves as little fish in a big pond or any number of other metaphors in which they are powerless, and others are all-powerful. A more useful way of viewing an organization – any organization, all organizations – is as a playground for adults (replete with bullies, sissies, fun-loving playmates and, of course, playground supervisors). You have just as much right to be there as anyone else and the buttons and levers of the organization are

every bit as much yours to push as they are anyone else's.

To be sure, you will encounter a ruling class in every organization of which you're ever a member. For the most part, these will be oligarchies (rule by the few); such is the nature of organizations, especially for-profit, publicly traded stock corporations. But, despite the absence of the kinds of checks and balances found in government and the military, you are not a mere pawn in someone else's game. It's your game, too.

One of the great games in many organizations is business; another is politics. Learn to play politics; not because you want to become a player but so you can defend yourself if and when need be. Learn the rules; not so you can blindly follow them but so you can invoke them when and if need be. Study the culture of the organization; study its strengths and its weaknesses because some day you might need to leverage them in pursuit of your own agenda. (If you think that last statement is self-serving, consider this: If you can't exploit the culture of an organization in pursuit of an agenda you're not fit for a senior executive slot because that is exactly what senior executives have to do.)

I don't want to sermonize here but I do want to make it perfectly clear that you have every right to look after yourself in any and all organizational settings. To view matters otherwise is to make yourself into a pawn or a patsy. As a well-known figure in the training business once observed, "You can love your company until you're blue in the face but it will never love you back." Organizations are indeed playgrounds for adults. Learn to play – and have fun. And don't worry about someone else moving your cheese. Remember; stripped of its fancy dress, the basic game played in organizations is one of making *their* cheese into *your* cheese. *They* can move *their* cheese all they want. Once it's *your* cheese, tell 'em to keep their mitts off. If they don't, rap 'em on the knuckles (figuratively speaking, of course). Most of all, have fun.

Finally, something Andrews wrote in his article is well worth repeating here:

“Ethical decisions therefore require of individuals three qualities that can be

identified and developed. The first is competence to recognize ethical issues and to think through the consequences of alternative resolutions. The second is self-confidence to seek out different points of view and then to decide what is right at a given time and place, in a particular set of relationships and circumstances. The third is what William James called tough-mindedness, which in management is the willingness to make decisions when all that needs to be known cannot be known and when the questions that press for answers have no established and incontrovertible answers.”

Andrews' comments apply as much to individual employees in an organization as they do to the organization's executive cadre. Indeed, perhaps they apply even more.

Get the Book

I have published a book of sea stories, tales from my Navy days. As the ones you've just read indicate, they are not just for sailors. They touch on matters of concern to everyone who lives and works in large, rule-bound organizations. The book is available from Amazon at the link below:

[“Sea Stories” on Amazon](#)

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