

Conflict of Interest

Conflict of Interest: The Final Frontier

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“I once worked with a supervisor whose position of leadership involved evaluations. One day this supervisor began selling “items” to the staff for personal financial gain.” And so begins the conflict.

Those words are taken from the first assignment for this class, which was to describe a *personal conflict*. It is strange to me that I would return to this very conflict as the theme for the final paper, as I am even conflicted within myself that my preoccupation with this experience still persists. I believe it is the unresolved nature that causes me to return to it as an obtuse and insidious cause of many other conflicts after the fact.

Often it is a law or policy or set of rules that provides a clear delineation between right and wrong. When we examine for example a school’s policy on wrongful conduct and read definitions such as: “misuse of authority for personal gain or other non-district purpose” or “fraud, corruption, conflicts of interest or abuse by another employee relating to his office or employee” (XXX Policy 9428, no. 2,3) there should be no question that a supervisor selling expensive make-up items for a private business in a school setting to employees (under their supervisory jurisdiction) would be deemed an absolute *no-no*. As a co-supervisor, the personal conflict I experienced was a struggle between having knowledge of the wrongdoing yet remaining loyal to the authority to which I was in subjection. At first I tried to convince myself that if I ignored it long enough, it would surely go away. When it did not, I had an overwhelming sense of resentment and disrespect. The question remains: how could the definition of right and wrong become so blurred?

According to the study done by Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson (2003) power was defined as “an individual’s relative capacity to modify others’ states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments.” (pg. 265). That definition exaggerates the issue

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embedded in an employee's pressure for yielding to a supervisor's salesmanship. Should the employee say, 'no thank you', then would resources be withheld and/or punishments administered and conversely should an employee buy such items in hopes of rewards and/or resources? This notion of gain or pain passed through my reasoning as I wondered why some bought, others did not and still others who did either talked about it after the fact.

The day came when complaints from the teacher's union surfaced and though I was not present when it was initially discussed, I heard it through the supervisor's perspective. She rhetorically asked as though to assume my agreement, "Can you believe they would say there are concerns about me selling things here at school when they do it all the time with each other? They have AVON and fundraisers for their children, so what is the big deal if I am doing it?" I could no longer be silent and said my piece: a supervisor whose job it is to evaluate staff on professional effectiveness cannot be selling items for personal gain, particularly in a climate where teacher evaluations are at the center of much scrutiny and debate.

It is the complete absence of acknowledgement of possible error on behalf of one with power over individuals with less power that exemplifies a construct of invincibility. Gruenfeld et al. (2003) noted that "through the repeated exercise of power individuals adopt more vainglorious selfconcepts and as a consequence denigrate the less powerful" (pg. 266). However it appeared that in this environment, those less powerful are as practiced in yielding to overt pressure as the one with power is in exerting it. Internally, it became harder for me to imagine explaining why such actions were errant and my own resentment solidified my position.

My warning finally came and the supervisor received it with complete an utter *dumbfounderment*. I am not sure if she did not agree with what I said or simply shocked that I was in disagreement at all. Until this time, it was my role to "support, encourage and facilitate"

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the vision of this person though I often was at odds with it for a myriad of other reasons.

Unfortunately, this disclosure of my stance did not deter the business transactions, in fact the buying and selling continued unbridled or through my lens, brazenly. However, it was this business venture that resulted in an increase of my job load since my “partner” was preoccupied.

One element that remains unclear to me is how such an obvious breach of policy could be construed as anything other than wrong. I became nervous and threatened at the possibility that wrong-doing may be discovered and the wrong-doing was not my own. I could not imagine how transactions involving money could be so bold. Gruenfeld et al. (2003) proposed that high-power individuals, who are disposed to approach, will “attend to potential rewards rather than to threats and as a consequence will construe others through a lens of self-interest” (pg. 277). If such a proposal is true, then the monetary gain (reward) outweighed or clouded the possibility of negative consequences. However it was the “above the law” attitude that appeared hypocritical because the role of one in authority is to enforce the rules and policies set forth in the institution.

My resentment grew to uncontrollable heights, and I became disgruntled and disrespectful in other aspects of work. I finally requested mediation with Human Resources (HR). A kindly man played the role of sainted priest, and finally helped the root cause of the work disruption come to light: stop selling the make-up in the workplace and we can all get back to the business of running a large, complex school. I made it clear I would go no further with this allegation and HR appeared relieved that it could all simply end there. Unfortunately, it did not end there with my supervisor for she was incensed that I disclosed the activity.

Distrust ensued on both our parts, though I attempted to return to the normal operating relationship. She was resentful at the halt to her private business profits though perhaps more resentful that I ethical questions in general. The year ended with tension. She was calling on me

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to be her right-hand, but I had continued doubts about her left-hand's work. It was the suggestion of unethical behavior that was central to the entire conflict and to this very day it is seen with opposite viewpoints.

So now to filter this conflict through all that was gleaned in this course. As I look back, I see the many errors I made in responding to a work-place situation involving wrongful conduct. Trust appears to be at the heart of the issue, though shadows of mistrust had a foundation built years earlier. Kramer (1999) discussed the wide range of descriptions and definitions that trust in organizations may have: "ethically justifiable behavior", "morally correct decisions and actions based upon ethical principles" or "anticipated cooperation" but all undeniably psychological in nature (pg. 571). The definition that it is a more general attitude or expectancy about other people that resonates in this particular case. I expected that one in authority is an exemplar of "policy-maintenance", however embedded and unrealistic that notion was within me. It was the violation of my predisposed ideal that was most disturbing, or the perceived hypocrisy.

Trust as a rational choice was now at the center of the future working relationship (Kramer, 1999). The concept that trust would be in both of our best interests, as well as the interest of the institution was at the forefront of the conflict however it seemed an impossible state. Throughout our working relationship, I had already come to a place of near perfect distrust, with the selling incident cinching up the state. For my co-supervisor, my decision to stop the private business was a line in the sand in which I had crossed, maybe better said, *double-crossed*. With such an invisible cloud distrust looming, peace was elusive. I believe for me it was "self-presentational concerns and identity-related needs and motives" that influenced my "trust-related cognition and choice" (pg. 574). I was unable to choose to trust because the roles we held within

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the organization were layered with many ethical decisions and implications. She never actually acknowledged that the selling activity was wrong, though she did stop.

Though I do not believe I could have avoided calling for an end to the business dealings, I do consider the many ways I could have handled the situation better. In a review of Weeks (1994) essential steps, I recognize my errors and ways I could have better resolved the conflict.

First, I never sought a calm, peaceful atmosphere to communicate my concern. I spoke mostly in doorways or standing, ready to move. One reason I may have avoided the more intimate environment was because of my utter loss of the little respect I had before any of selling began. I should have put my own feelings aside and spoke straight and objectively.

I did not clarify perceptions at all, due to the “ghost conflicts” that muddied the waters. I was so resentful at the lack of professionalism and distraction that I left the key issue, the wrongful conduct, under layers of other issues.

I had great difficulty focusing on shared needs. I needed to expand on our shared needs and realize that we needed one another in order to successfully resolve the conflict. I was not concerned about meeting her needs at all due to the utter disappointment.

It was fairly impossible to have a positive view of power given the experiences to date concerning the misuse and abuse. Her outlooks, ideas, convictions, and actions were mostly negative before the selling ever began. I needed to strengthen our partnerships but we were in conflict. I wish that I could have focused on enough positive energy so to draw out a worthwhile solution. The emotions were mixed: desire for resolution, demand for righteousness.

At this point I am looking toward the future in terms of peacekeeping and trust building but deep down I am fairly sure she does not and will not trust me ever again. When I called her out on an unethical behavior (albeit privately) she was shocked, defensive and incensed.

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Unfortunately this injustice involved a violation of values and principles that were important to me. This was about behavior that was unjust and not simply one that I did not like. I could have focused on the behavior, not on the person. I should have tried saying, "I feel what you are doing is wrong, and I want to understand why you did it. Would you feel it was wrong if someone else did it?" This would have been more likely to result in a positive response and some feedback. I never clearly stated what I thought was wrong since I thought it was so obvious.

Ultimately, I wish it did not become an 'I verses You' struggle. If it never happened at all, the presence of conflicting values, beliefs and view of abusing power would still have present but without that sprinkle of wrongful conduct. Sometimes that little sprinkle is all that is necessary to blow the lid off it.

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References

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