

Boiling the Frog: Fighting the Slippery Slope of Ethical Indiscretions in the Workplace



By Emily C. Stumhofer

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

A familiar anecdote suggests that if a frog is dropped into a pot of boiling water, he will immediately jump out, but if he is dropped into a pot of cool water that is gradually heated, he won't perceive the danger, and will be cooked to death. Although some recent science suggests that frogs may behave differently than this anecdote suggests, it is still an apt analogy to the case of ethical lapses in the workplace. Just as the frog in cool water, a person who continues to commit ever more serious ethical transgressions may not comprehend the increasing danger until it is too late.

Consider the following quote: "It starts out with you taking a little bit... You get comfortable with that, and before you know it, it snowballs into something big." This quote is from Bernie Madoff, who ended up stealing more than \$18 billion from his investors.

In a recent exchange with Plan International USA's Kitty Holt, she describes how important it is for people with power to set the "tone at the top" and make ethically correct decisions.

"I'm sure many of us have heard hollow words about 'doing the right thing' followed by the very speaker of those words doing the wrong thing, or, even worse, leaders that say 'Do what I say, not what I do.'

Accompanying Enron's 64-page Code of Ethics is a statement from the late CEO Ken Lay, which noted 'We (Enron employees) are responsible for conducting the business affairs of the Company in accordance with all applicable laws and in a moral and honest manner.' Unfortunately, Enron's collapse was due to their not following that simple paragraph."

We've all heard the stories of corrupt politicians and people who take advantage of the power they have by making improper or illegal decisions on how to use it. The conviction of former Virginia governor Bob McDonnell is the latest example of what can happen over time when a person relaxes his ethical standards and no one steps in early to correct those transgressions.

As a society, we often find ourselves pointing at situations like this, and wondering how someone can do something that is clearly so wrong, and in many cases, illegal. In some cases, however, instead of a single unethical decision, perhaps the real story was that lax ethical habits and behaviors led to increasingly wrong action and eventually the career-ending downfall.

Imagine you're at the office thinking about all the things that you need to get done. You glance over at the corner, at a huge stack of brand-new binders for filing projects at work. It would be so easy to just take an extra one home for your son's school project. You really don't have time to stop by the office supply store on the way home. Anyway, it's only one binder, and it's only this one time.

Most of us would consider the above and think, "Well, that's not a big deal." But isn't it?

A few months ago, *The Journal of Applied Psychology* published a report based on studies from several universities around the country entitled "[The Slippery Slope: How Small Ethical Transgressions Pave the Way for Larger Future Transgressions](#)." The authors of the study outline several important findings. First, overtime as people are able to rationalize small ethical indiscretions, it becomes easier to justify larger indiscretions. Thus, when faced with smaller but growing dilemmas over time, people are likely to make unethical decisions. However, when there is a large abrupt dilemma (versus a slowly increasing dilemma), the person facing it is more likely to make an ethical decision.

The research suggests that habitual small transgressions can grow overtime into an ability to justify ever larger and more serious ethical transgressions. So how can risk leaders prevent these transgressions from ever happening in the first place?

Showing Others the Path to What's Right

- **Inspire a prevention focus in your workforce** – By clearly outlining standards and ethical pitfalls through written policies and setting an example, an employer can reduce self-justifying behavior for small ethical transgressions. For example, by outlining the consequences of taking binders home for personal use, the ability for an employee to creatively rationalize the decision is minimized. Having a prevention focus can enable employees to check themselves and correct minor transgressions as they occur.
- **Incorporate ethical language into all parts of the organization's culture** – By embedding an ethical focus and commitment into your organization's mission, policies, and procedures, you can create a culture where doing the right thing is part of every decision made by staff in the organization. One of the Center's clients tethers all decisions to whether the decision is in the best interests of the vulnerable children they serve.
- **Be vigilant and resolve to address minor ethical offenses** – If you are attentive to even minor ethical infractions, and address them in a timely manner, you can prevent the downward slide on ethic's slippery slope. Also, if employees are aware that a co-worker has been called on a transgression, they might be less likely to rationalize their own ethical lapses. Remember that accountability simply means doing the things you say you are going to do.

For further reading, check out the *Harvard Business Review's* [Ethical Breakdowns](#) article, or the *Huffington Post's* [How Do You Deal with an Unethical, Productive Employee](#).

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