



THE BUSINESS ETHICS FIELD GUIDE

Challenge 13: Showing Mercy

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This series features 13 articles from Brad Agle, Aaron Miller and Bill O'Rourke, coauthors of The Business Ethics Field Guide. Each article focuses on a common work dilemma, provides real life examples and insightful solutions. For more information, please refer to the cover story in the November/December 2018 issue.

Everyone makes mistakes and occasionally fails to perform satisfactorily. Everyone needs help from time to time. When someone needs your help, forbearance or forgiveness, how should you respond? That's the heart of the "showing mercy" dilemma.



A healthy work environment tolerates mistakes. A fundamental element of that tolerance is that everyone learns from the mistakes. Mistakes are costly. More than just financially, failures are costly to reputations and relationships. So, the difficulty in this dilemma is knowing when the cost of showing mercy is too high. And mercy always comes at a cost. So, you need to think carefully about when and how you grant it.

Other difficulties include the fact that some individuals often take advantage of merciful responses. How many times should mercy be shown for the same mistake? Perhaps a limit is necessary. Showing too much mercy might encourage the behavior that needs to be prevented.

Someone, somewhere, pays the price for a mistake. It might be the company that loses profit or suffers reputation damage. It might be a client, customer or community that suffers real, verifiable damage. This doesn't mean that a mistake shouldn't be forgiven. It means that the cost must be considered when deciding when and how to show mercy. Leaders must be attentive to both company performance and employee development.

When faced with this dilemma, here are some questions to ask:

1. **Is mercy yours to give?** This is important. The person deciding whether to grant mercy needs to have the responsibility for the effects of the decision. If you are not the right person to grant mercy, you can still get involved and advocate for mercy because it's the ethically right thing to do.
2. **Does showing mercy hurt others?** Mistakes often have broad implications. Be sure to consider everyone who may be hurt if mercy is granted and factor those implications into the decision making.

13 ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Upcoming articles in this series will take a closer look at each dilemma.

1 STANDING UP TO POWER

Someone in power is asking you to do something unethical.

2 MADE A PROMISE

Conflicting commitments force you to choose.

3 INTERVENTION

You see something wrong. How do you proceed?

4 CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Multiple roles put you at cross purposes.

5 SUSPICIONS WITHOUT ENOUGH EVIDENCE

You believe something is going on, but you're not sure.

6 PLAYING DIRTY

Achieving justice but by doing something unethical.

7 SKIRTING THE RULES

Bending a rule for a better outcome.

8 DISSEMBLANCE

Misrepresenting the truth for better outcome.

9 LOYALTY

Giving up ethical stance to protect valued relationship.

10 SACRIFICING PERSONAL VALUES

Living ethically might put burden on others.

11 UNFAIR ADVANTAGE

When opportunity exists to wield an unfair upper hand.

12 REPAIR

When you are responsible for a mistake.

13 SHOWING MERCY

You could grant forgiveness, but you don't know if you should.



3. Who bears the immediate cost of showing mercy? Looking at the immediate consequences, rather than the remote effects, can make the decision easier.

4. Is this the precedent you want to set? Extending mercy (or withholding it) in one instance may require you to extend it (or withhold it) in all similar circumstances. Ethical behavior must be fair and it must be consistent.

5. Does granting mercy violate organizational policy? Policy is usually based on good thinking. Reviewing the policy may help you deal with this dilemma. There may be legitimate reasons to act differently from the policy. Unless you have the power to change the company rules, you need to seek an exception from someone with the authority to grant an exception. Articulating your reasons for the exception will also help you to understand the issue and the implications.

There are pitfalls when granting mercy. Consider them:

1. Endorsing Poor Behavior: Don't send the message that you endorse the behavior. Be sure to clarify future expectations and penalties to those involved.

2. Punishing Improperly: If the punishment is too severe or too lenient, you can be perceived as being unfair, lose credibility and the trust of others.

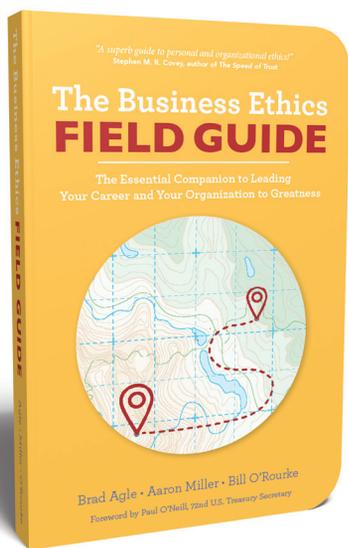
3. Avoiding Transparency: Explain the reasoning for the mercy to guide others about the full reasoning for the decision. Transparency builds trust.

4. Forgetting Conflicts of Interest: If you have a close relationship with the person seeking mercy, consider recusing yourself from the decision. At a minimum, be transparent in the explanation.

5. Ignoring the Costs: Don't forget who bears the cost of the failure and of offering mercy. Consider the costs — all of the costs — before deciding.

In deliberating whether or not to grant mercy, you need to consider that we all make mistakes. Mistakes are the way we learn. If a mistake is made unintentionally, maybe mercy is appropriate. Most people learn from their mistakes if effort is taken to explain the consequences of failure along with the correct way to conduct oneself. With wise intervention, they don't repeat the same mistake ever again. In these instances, mercy reinforces the right behavior.

However, an intentional violation of a value of your organization may not deserve mercy. Willful acts of dishonesty and theft are wrong and perhaps they should not be excusable. To show mercy in such situations sets a dangerous precedent for the entire organization that is watching. So, by not tolerating willful violations of company values, it serves to reinforce those values rather strongly. Whether the decision leads to punishment or forgiveness (or a blend of both), communicate the decision with sincerity. Establishing an environment where employees can share their concerns, doubts, troubles and insights will help prevent failures and promote acceptable fixes. 🌟



Having spoken to a number of federal judges about their roles, I've learned about mercy. To a person, they claim that the most difficult part of their job is sentencing. Even with all the sentencing guidelines, these judges are expected to dispense justice in their punishment. That involves considering the circumstances and the myriad of factors involved to arrive at the right, just conclusion. Handling business mistakes is similar. In my mind, discretion exercised wisely, consistently and fairly distinguishes good bosses from great bosses.



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