

Loyalty Isn't a Virtue, It's The Enemy Of Workplace Ethics



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Loyalty is not a virtue, even though it feels like the indispensable virtue. And the loyal person is not a saint, even though she feels like the chief of saints.

Technically, loyalty is neither virtue nor vice. It's simply a tendency, a temperament, a compulsion. But in practice, it fuels the worst movements and developments in human history, as well as much of the rot within ordinary offices today.

Loyalty is what allows followers to not merely overlook the crimes of their leaders, but to spin them into acts of heroism. It sires the worst in our politics today. It allows leaders to overlook the worst sins of their worst followers, thus helping to turn their company or their cause into a toxic, sycophantic moral wasteland. It allows board members to tolerate or rationalize the bad behavior of their chief executive cronies. Loyalty is such a force for destruction because it readily clashes with genuine virtues such as honesty and fairness—all while seeing itself as superior to those virtues.

The “loyalty bind,” as some psychologists call it, keeps the members of an organization from being able to see tumors metastasizing in their midst. It's what leads to scandals and cover-ups in churches, city halls, companies and ideological movements.

If one person finally finds the courage to speak up and point out an injustice committed by a leader, the loyalty bind is what causes angry followers to retaliate. Usually viciously. They slam the person's motives or integrity, and they assert that the good of the organization involves unyielding loyalty to the hierarchy as it currently stands.

To criticize loyalty in this way is not to say that all problems and conflicts must be dealt with in the most brutal and public fashion possible. They can often be better dealt with through processes offering some confidentiality and discretion. But loyalty is the force that typically keeps them from being dealt with at all.

The challenge is to move organizations away from the notion of loyalty to persons and toward the notion of loyalty toward first principles. These principles include transparency, integrity, accountability and a constant readiness to reform in whatever way necessary—no matter whose personal interests may be affected.

This isn't easy, because humans are tribal—we evolved to be in the society of other humans and to instinctively sacrifice our own safety in order to defend them against outside threats. The notion of defending shared principles came later, and it still hasn't taken root fully.

It's something of a management cliché to suggest that good leaders inspire loyalty. But the reality is that it's often the bad ones who focus on that. Good leaders inspire principled behavior, not loyalty or obedience.

Rob Asghar is the author of Leadership Is Hell: How to Manage Well and Escape with Your Soul