

Hear no evil;

see no evil;

Speak no evil



# NOT

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# ANYMORE

by Nan DeMars, CAP

*Recently an admin noticed that her boss has suddenly begun listing on his expense reports client lunches at an establishment which is a well-known gentlemen's club. She processes his expense reports and knows that the compliance department wouldn't approve of the expense. Is it her concern? Is she accountable?*

Yes, like it or not this *is* your business but how to approach your boss is another matter. Questionable ethics have been around for centuries. Scott B. Baucum, Monsanto's Global Ethics Director, wants someone in the seat calling him on things that might seem wrong.

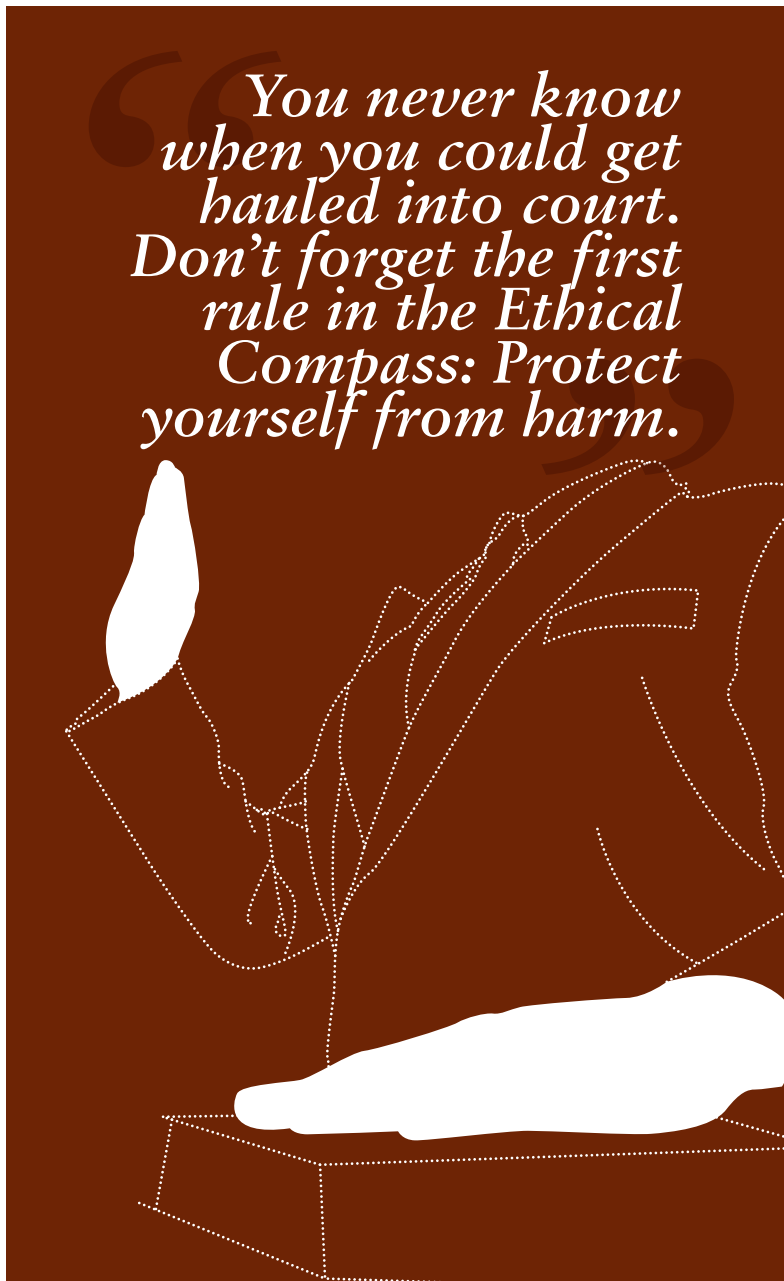
"I like to see myself as a good, honest person but I am often imperfect and in a hurry. I need someone near me with a prudent perspective and courage enough to say, 'Uh, you might want to rethink this one, boss!' The *last* thing I need is someone who questions nothing, accepts everything and thinks he/she is being a good employee. I need a partner with a strong sense of integrity and courage enough to use it."

All you have to do is watch the popular TV show *Mad Men* to see how far admins have come with accountability on the job.

In *Mad Men*, the 1960-era Madison Avenue workplace reflects a world of secretaries with no power who are expected to fall on their swords for their bosses, willingly take the undeserving darts for mistakes and, above all, blindly follow orders, with no questions or arguments.

Not anymore! Today's administrative professionals operate in a "we get it" climate. They fully recognize they are accountable for their own actions as well as any misbehavior they may witness. Silence is consent. It *is* your

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responsibility to keep your boss out of trouble, your company out of trouble and, most certainly, yourself out of trouble.

### **Ethical Priority Compass®**

If you follow these three points in my Ethical Priority Compass in order, you will never be lost.

**First, take care of yourself.** You must protect yourself from physical harm, financial harm, legal action, even emotional harm—and do so in a way that is aligned to your own personal morals and values. Remember, when you take care of yourself you also pro-

tect your professional reputation as well as the standards and integrity of your profession.

**Second, take care of your company and its customers.** Without them, you have no livelihood. So they deserve your best efforts and your loyalty and it is your responsibility to protect them from any harm whatsoever and to continually act in their best interests.

**Third, take care of your supervisors.** This is a professional relationship that merits all your skills, acumen and certainly your loyalty—but no longer blind or unconditional loyalty.

### **When Faced With An Ethical Work Dilemma**

Take the dilemma shared at the beginning of the article. Even though the situation looks dicey, she has options.

### **Make Certain Of Your Facts**

Jeri Elder, Area Assistant, Boston Scientific, CRV, Newport Beach, Calif. says, "Sometimes Gentlemen's Clubs actually have a regular restaurant during the day. I would call the location and ask to be sure."

### **Talk Before You Walk**

Initiate a discussion with your boss *before* actions are taken that could not be undone. This should not be a confrontational-style conversation (they never turn out well), it surely should be an open and frank one-with no sugar-coating.

## Explain Your Concern

The “I” approach is always better than the accusatory “you” approach (the latter putting one on the defensive). Best lead-in launch is: “I have a reservation about submitting this particular expense receipt because it is from an establishment that probably wouldn’t clear our compliance regulations. What do you think?” You could even add, “I’m just trying to keep the two of us out of trouble.” And, the real show-stopper is always: “How would this look as a newspaper headline: *XYZ Company Executives Entertain Clients at Strip Clubs.*” In a perfect world, your boss will be receptive, correct his actions, thank you and recognize you as his ally.

## When Life Is Not Always Perfect

If your boss disregards your advice and insists on submission, you have no choice than to kick it upstairs because your knowledge makes you complicit in his activity. Follow the Ethical Priority Compass and protect yourself and the company by discussing the matter with a trusted superior.

Don’t forget to document the entire incident for your protection.

You never know when you could get hauled into court. Don’t forget the first rule in the ethical compass: protect yourself from harm.

Former Hewlett-Packard CEO Mark Hurd resigned over expense account improprieties that were meant to conceal a close relationship with an HP contractor. The company’s investigation concluded that while there was no sexual harassment violation, Hurd had violated HP’s “Standards of Business Conduct” which HP takes seriously. The company and Hurd both acknowledged in a joint statement that his poor judgment had “seriously undermined his credibility and damaged his effectiveness in leading HP.” In this case, tugging on the fudged expense reports unraveled some surprises. Nothing is ethically trivial.

Today, when high-profile cases with any taint of questionable ethics occur, boards of directors correctly ask for a

review of their policies. Assistants are frequently on the front lines of these reviews and, again, they are being held personally accountable.

## Management Has Cranked Up Accountability As Well

It is important to note that new government regulations have caused publicly-owned companies to raise the bar these days on ethical behavior. These employers now require their employees to complete periodic ethics/compliance training. Gale Peden, CAP, past president, Hernando DeSoto IAAP Chapter, Memphis, Tenn. says her company’s training makes it easy not “to wonder if something is bad enough that it requires reporting. If it seems unethical to me, I must report it and leave the decision-making process to our ethics and compliance department. Very neat and tidy, I think.” Privately-held companies are catching up as well and are now recognizing the importance of establishing clear-cut ethical guidelines and ongoing training for employees.

Embracing accountability is a two-way street today. Both supervisors *and* their employees are acknowledging each other’s accountability for their respective actions. Savvy managers are increasingly demanding relationships with their employees that routinely improve the ethical dimensions of a decision or practice. Such a partnership allows both parties involved to feel confident enough to bring discussions to the table without fear of being judged. After all, if you and your partner agree on absolutely everything all the time, then you probably need a new partner.

## You Are Who You Are

“When it all comes down to it, although you must work to feed your family, etc., you also have to be true to yourself and your values—in short, be able to live with your actions,” says Lin Carr, Executive Assistant, Spectrum Health System, Grand Rapids, Mich.

At the end of the day, you’re the only one who has to look at yourself in the mirror. Be careful not to compromise your personal morals and values,

*It takes  
20 years  
to build a  
reputation  
and five  
minutes to  
ruin it. If you  
think about  
that, you’ll  
do things  
differently.*  
~Warren Buffet

even when those around you behave in a manner to which you object. Your choices and decisions define who *you* are.

President Abraham Lincoln had a belief in the “better angels of our nature.” We all want to do the right thing and, it’s easier when we work in a supportive culture.

Haven’t we all been tempted to just button it and adjust to an ethical dilemma instead of confronting and resolving it? We know, however, that these adjustments get easier and easier when we start making them routinely. When we don’t fight to hold the moral high ground, we quit on ourselves.

Now is the time for us to be our best professional selves and to be sure we are on the side of the angels. Don’t wait for someone else to inspire, cajole, or even shame you into acknowledging your accountability on the job. Begin today, and reap the rewards so many have found in doing the right thing.

### About the author:

A past International President of IAAP, Nan DeMars, CAP is an internationally-recognized thought leader and practitioner in the area of workplace ethics. Her latest book is *You’ve GOT To Be Kidding! How to Keep Your Job Without Losing Your Integrity* (John Wiley & Sons). Nan’s website is [www.office-ethics.com](http://www.office-ethics.com).