

# Loyalty Now

A wake-up call.

By Nan DeMars

The drama in N.J. Governor Chris Christie's office continues regarding allegations that associates of the governor closed traffic lanes leading to the George Washington Bridge in order to punish the mayor of Fort Lee with major traffic jams in that city and surrounding communities. The situation is certainly an example of government derailed. But, it is also a challenge to our view of workplace loyalty today. What can we all learn from this ethical train wreck? We don't know whether or not Christie had established a clear-cut moral compass for his staff. Regardless, it appears as though some of them chose to go rogue.

Establishing and communicating the ethical foundation of any organization is the first step in creating an ethical workplace—followed by a formal code of ethics, conduct, and mission statement plus ongoing ethics training.

Employees need and deserve a blueprint on what is acceptable workplace behavior and what is not, and this North Star compass must start at the top. Dr. George Shapiro, Professor at the University of Minnesota, states: "Bosses with good ethics have followers; bosses with poor ethics have subordinates."

## But, what *is* loyalty in the workplace?

I happen to be a fan of loyalty. Anyone who has been married, partnered, started a business, maintained a life-long friendship, or gone through a difficult time knows that loyalty can be the air in our life raft when the big ship starts to founder. Actress Elizabeth Taylor once said, "You know who your friends are—when a scandal erupts!" But, Liz and I are talking about personal loyalty.

A paycheck does not buy loyalty in the workplace today. Because we value loyalty, we instinctively want to be loyal to those with whom we work. That "I'll watch your back" kind of allegiance is certainly desired and appreciated in any boss/team/employee relationship, but under what circumstances is that kind of loyalty deserved today?

## Dark side of loyalty

For all its virtue, loyalty has a dark side as well. In the past, the concept of workplace loyalty really meant blind loyalty, ergo unconditional, unthinking, and unquestioned compliance with your boss's requests.

When a company overemphasizes this kind of blind devotion, we have what FBI whistleblower Coleen Rowley terms "groupthink." The result is a dangerous lack of skepticism and debate, denial of reality, and suspension of personal responsibility.

Corporate cultures that tolerate nothing less than unconditional obedience take a shortcut to a dead end. At these companies there is a familiar excuse for poor outcomes: "Right or wrong, if my boss tells me to do it, I do it." In this blind allegiance environment, anyone raising questions is seen as "disloyal," even when they have crucial and perhaps lifesaving concerns. And you can even naïvely follow a charismatic leader (who can do no wrong in your eyes) straight over the cliff. Loyalty gone awry is betrayal at its worst.

Being loyal to one's boss has always been an attribute of an employee. It's in one's DNA anyhow (if just for self-preservation), and often noted as a requirement for a sterling employee. But, today's employees are operating in a "we get it" climate, ergo they fully recognize they are not only accountable for their own actions, but also accountable for any misbehavior they may witness (and that includes their bosses'). They realize they are at higher risk for suffering legal, personal, and professional consequences of their actions, inactions, complicity, or silence.

No professional can operate with blinders on. In fact, to do nothing when witnessing wrongdoing brings to mind Oprah Winfrey's oft-repeated warning: "Silence is consent!"

## Commitment is the new loyalty

Fortunately, today's definition of loyalty has morphed into a commitment to do the right thing. This is a

commitment first to your personal and professional standards, then to your company's mission, and then to your supervisors' mission.

You can easily do this by following my Ethical Priority Compass®. This is a simple, hierarchical approach to orient yourself to any ethical dilemma (loyalty or otherwise) and, thereby, equip yourself to make the right decisions even under extreme pressure. If you follow these three points—in this order—you will never be lost:

1. *Take care of yourself.* Protect yourself from illegal, financial, immoral, and even emotional harm by not participating in any unethical behaviors—and do so in a way that is aligned to your own personal morals and values. Even Mickey Mouse used to say, “You *have* to be *yourself!*” And remember, when you take care of yourself, you also protect your professional reputation as well as the standards and integrity of your particular profession.
2. *Take care of your organization.* Ethically, your organization deserves your loyalty because it has provided you with your livelihood and, thus, you should continually act in its best interests. Remain true to your company's code of ethics and conduct. Those pieces of paper can be your touchstones—they should leave no wiggle room for unethical behavior.
3. *Take care of your boss or bosses.* This is a professional relationship that merits all your skills, acumen, and certainly your loyalty. But, this loyalty is no longer blind or unconditional. Your boss is your professional partner and needs all your support and attention in maintaining an ethical workplace.

### No more eyes wide shut!

If traditional views of loyalty no longer serve us, and there is a new definition of the word itself, is loyalty no longer relevant? Not at all—in fact, some argue that loyalty is needed more than ever to keep you grounded in a fast-paced, rough-and-tumble world. We certainly need the sense of teamwork and camaraderie that comes with loyalty if we are going to be productive and positive focused.

But, let's be smart about this. Loyalty must be earned—in both directions! It is the outcome after mutual respect and trust have been earned. Loyalty is conditional today—it does not extend to compromising personal ethics or the well-being of the company.

### New expectations

Managers and employees nowadays agree that they must view loyalty as a reciprocal commitment to help each other “do the right thing.” Both are aware of, and even hypersensitive to, their separate accountabilities, and both realize that no one gets to play the blame game anymore. Each can hold the other to higher expectations, and neither ought to expect the other to sacrifice himself or herself. Loyalty now is something to be negotiated, not presumed.

### Start talking!

I encourage you to start talking about loyalty's new limits and expectations in your organization and to do so in such a way that will result in enhancing your mutual trust and respect all around. This is a conversation that must transpire long before a loyalty crisis occurs:

- *Bosses:* Are your employees fully aware of your moral compass? Do they understand and revere your company's ethical standards and values? If they are not on board or guidance is a bit fuzzy, you might have a reckless culture that will result in your being blindsided someday if a team (or team member) gets derailed.
- *Staffers:* Are you aware of your company's ethical standards and values? Do you know where your boss stands on critical issues? If faced with a tough situation, can you unequivocally answer the question, “What would my boss want me to do here?”

Most employees today (at any level of responsibility) want to do the right thing. And together, boss-employee partnerships and the new way of interpreting loyalty in the workplace can help each side keep the other out of court, hot water, and harm's way.

U.S. Air Force Col. John Boyd said it best: “If a man asks me for my loyalty, I will give him my honesty. If a man asks me for my honesty, I will give him my loyalty!”

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**About the author:** Nan DeMars is an internationally recognized thought leader and practitioner in the area of workplace ethics. In addition to being an author, columnist, and media talk-show guest, Nan's energizing, interactive ethics workshops and keynote addresses have trained thousands of employees at all levels of responsibility and in all types of industries. Her latest book is *YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING! HOW TO KEEP YOUR JOB WITHOUT LOSING YOUR INTEGRITY* (John Wiley & Sons). Nan can be contacted at [www.office-ethics.com](http://www.office-ethics.com). †