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Winning the Devil's Bargain
by Elizabeth Doty

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When the business world compromises an individual's values, courage and climate can make all the difference.

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I had my first moment of truth with an organization back in 1985, when I realized I would have to either leave my job or compromise my own integrity. It happened at the end of the annual meeting I'd helped organize for the 55 directors of the luxury hotel chain where I worked as a sales manager. I'd spent that week temporarily relieved of my regular duties to oversee "special arrangements," and I'd come very close to quitting.

It had happened because, in front of the executive committee, my boss's boss had assigned me to select attractive female managers to host a theme breakfast for our (all male) hotel directors, and to choose low-cut costumes for them. The demand had shocked me, but I could not refuse without appearing insubordinate or prudish. I said nothing at the time; later, I spoke to him in private. He retracted the request, but the experience left me with lingering concerns about this company's willingness to compromise its managers' professionalism.

I wasn't naive. I told myself that ethical bumps in the road were part of the game of business. Our hotel managers sometimes secretly canceled guests' discount-rate reservations on oversold nights. I myself had concocted the "right" numbers on sales forecasts, and then convinced my boss in his staff meeting that I really believed them. For four years I'd been able to persuade myself that one had to expect such practices even in first-class operations. And it almost worked this time, too; by the final night of the annual meeting, I'd nearly stopped fuming over the costume incident. I even allowed myself to feel some pride in how well the event had come off.

But then came the featured highlight: the annual raffle for frontline employees. The lights were bright on the stage. Clusters of faces in relative darkness — the hotel's 400 housekeepers, bellhops, engineers, servers, and desk clerks — waited as the raffle drum spun in silence. The public relations director reached in and drew the grand prize ticket; and then she looked straight up at me and called out in a bright voice, "It's Elizabeth Doty!"

My heart sank. They must have rigged the prize to ensure that I

would win, hoping to rekindle my loyalty after that hellish week. I knew, and felt that everyone else knew, that the moment was utterly false. Still, I stood and smiled as I accepted my award. I was determined to appear loyal and committed. But I wasn't. I left for business school six months later.

There is always some tension between our values as individuals and the compromises that we must make for our organizations. Being "professional" requires that we learn to reconcile these tensions. But when does the willingness to go along go too far? My experience at

alizing world where executive decisions are made from afar, makes it difficult to justify that belief.

In 2005, I began a more focused interviewing project to see whether others experienced tension between their work personas and their core values. How did they reconcile the challenge? Did they find ways to "make a difference without getting killed," as one person put it? I conducted extensive interviews with 38 businesspeople from a range of industries, organizations, backgrounds, beliefs, and career stages. I spoke to directors; executives (vice presidents and above);

Elizabeth Doty
(EDoty@worklore.com) is an organizational consultant, a 12-year veteran of the hotel industry, a Harvard MBA, and a "recovering reengineer." Her firm, WorkLore, applies systems thinking, simulation, and storytelling for clients in manufacturing, high tech, financial services, educational testing, and real estate operations.

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that annual meeting forced me to confront the fact that, over the years, my seemingly minor compromises had accumulated into a violation of my core identity and beliefs. And I now know, after 17 years of privately interviewing businesspeople about their own tensions at work, that my experience isn't unique. As companies demand greater levels of productivity and commitment in an environment characterized by fierce corporate politics and the relentless pursuit of shareholder value, many managers and employees routinely grapple with predicaments that go straight to the question of personal integrity. On the one hand, it's essential to believe in the organization to succeed in any leadership job; on the other hand, the reality of many organizations, particularly in a glob-

frontline managers; and new professionals at large public and private companies, startups, and professional-services firms. I particularly sought out those who had a significant impact on their organization's policies, products, and programs, but who were not often in the limelight. I invited them all to tell, as candidly as they could, the story of their work lives and the criteria that guided their important choices.

I expected to hear cynicism mixed with arguments for separating work from "what really matters." Although I did hear some of that, I also heard people express a deep commitment to high ideals and a strong desire to believe in their organizations, even in the face of moral ambiguity. Some of those whom I talked to had confronted gross ethical violations, to be sure;

but it was much more common to feel ensnared by subtle inconsistencies and contradictions that gradually raised nagging doubts about the nature of one's employer. As one woman put it, "You always worry that you might have made a deal with the devil."

The Wounds of Commitment
Not surprisingly, those who dared to care deeply about their work had the worst stories to tell about being burned. An intensive-care nurse described having daily panic attacks on her way to work, terrified that someone would die on her shift because managed-care policies had tripled her patient load. A commercial banker talked of being told that either he or his peer would be fired — and then of being presented with a portfolio of real estate loans to approve that involved "looking the other way" on zoning violations.

And then there was Greg. He had been a corporate officer for a financial-services firm until the senior officers of his firm (including his boss) were indicted and sent to prison for embezzlement. Greg was no naif; he'd spent years in investment banking. As he put it, "You just rosy up the numbers a little. It's all part of the dance." He had come to this last firm specifically because he thought it was an unusually ethical place, where he could escape those pressures. That only made the shock of the alleged wrongdoings more painful. Three years later, when I met him one evening over dinner, he had not gone back to work. He articulated the bewilderment he still felt: "I believed in these people. I respected them; I even loved them in some way. Was I an idiot to be part of this? I can't reconcile it in my mind." He felt adrift;

distrustful and unsure of his own instincts. "I guess I'm suffering from the wounds of commitment," he confessed.

More than half the people I spoke with described a state of creeping uneasiness and loss of faith as their roles forced them into untenable situations. As I listened, I was reminded of Chris Argyris's description (in his famous article "Skilled Incompetence," *Harvard Business Review,* September 1, 1986) of a double bind: a mixed message or contradiction that is undiscussable and whose undiscussability is undiscussable. Here's an example. One day, working with an IT team in a Fortune 50 computer and office equipment company, I happened to sit in as an internal account team was directed to promise higher service levels to their customers. Three months later, I overheard the same group struggling to deal with a reorganization in an internal supplier organization that made delivering on those promises impossible. When I asked their leader why she did not speak up, she said, "What, and look like a whiner?" Bingo: undiscussability. Many of the people I interviewed spoke of similar situations, often leading to painful compromises or disappointments. Over time, they felt increasingly alienated from themselves. Amrita, a senior VP of innovation and strategic marketing for a global chemical company, confronted this

experience late in her career. "I had become an extremely competitive person.… I felt I had to be, given the people I worked with. Then one day I looked at myself in the mirror. I saw my tight face, my stiff jaw. It just wasn't me anymore. I had to ask myself, 'Who have I become?'"

As any successful leader will tell you, a business runs on the network of alliances, loyalties, and understandings among its people. We want to believe in our organizations, and our organizations want us to invest our discretionary effort in their causes. But when we join a cause, we naturally assume its leaders will reward us correspondingly, especially if we achieve results.

This is where we are wrong. Having listened to so many stories, I am increasingly convinced that organizations routinely break this implied social contract, compelled not by individual malice but by simple expediency. Unfortunately, the most effective short-term solutions to immediate problems often involve taking advantage of the very dedication evoked by the mission.

For example, a mid-career publishing executive who had fought to save a division found himself laying off the people who had pushed hardest to make a needed change. "My bosses challenged me to turn around the Florida operation," he later recalled, "to get it up to corporate standards because they didn't

> ## "When we sold the company, I felt like Caesar returning to Rome. But it ended my closest friendship."

want to have to shut it down. It turned into a fantastic assignment, working with dedicated people who were intensely proud to be part of the company. After 18 months, we had met the company's most ambitious targets. Then, based on our performance, corporate dramatically increased their growth projections. Of course, that meant they had to shut down the operation anyway, because only the corporate operating facility was set up for such high volume. I understood the decision, but telling the team was one of the hardest things I ever did. It was translated into Spanish as I spoke [half the team was Spanish-speaking], and for a good 90 seconds they were all smiling at me as the translation happened. They thought they were going to get a bonus, not be laid off."

Most people I talked to accepted such situations as part of the job. But clearly those experiences took a toll. Having been through such experiences repeatedly, people found it more difficult to give themselves wholeheartedly to any new endeavor. Somehow, they had to find a way to play the game differently next time.

The Five Strategies

In the interviews I conducted, I heard about five different strategies that people had adopted — to prepare in advance to win the "devil's bargain" and avoid disillusionment.

Playing to Win. Of the 38 people I spoke with, 18, at one point or another, had adopted a strategy focused on proving themselves. Skeptical about grandiose aspirations or altruistic ideas, especially in the workplace, they put their faith in drive, intelligence, and free markets to propel them to the top. They

took on challenges just to see if they could, putting work at the center of their lives and deferring their personal dreams and ideals until they had sufficient power and wealth to command respect. Dave, a 34-year-old technology entrepreneur, was typical of this group. "It took us five years of driving — days, nights, weekends. Doing deals, promising the moon, then pushing to meet impossible deadlines without enough staff. But when we sold the company last year, we made it big," he said. "I felt like Caesar returning to Rome after conquering the Gauls. That was my triumph."

The playing-to-win strategy tended to satisfy people for a time, but it could also lead to deep sadness, even shock. When Dave cashed in, he left behind a partner who hadn't benefited on the same scale. "You follow the lure of the money," he said, "but the M&A people don't tell you about the downside. Your partners are going to feel betrayed. I succeeded, but it ended my closest friendship. Now I have to ask myself, 'Am I a good guy?'"

Playing to Live. For the 15 interviewees who followed this strategy, work became primarily a means to an end. They remained committed to their jobs, but their real satisfaction came from life outside work, especially from their families. Remembering times when they burned out or lost touch with their true priorities, they learned to set limits.

"Because somebody's paycheck is going to be late, because somebody didn't like the results they got on a survey, that's a friggin' emergency? I don't think so," declared Roberta, a human resources director at a Fortune 100 computer software

company. "Don't get me wrong; I care a lot about my work. I'll go the extra mile, even work weekends once in a while. But mostly, I'm going to go home on time. I have a life outside of here. And that means saying no. I don't do it antagonistically, but I do have limits."

This strategy allowed people to live a richer life overall, but at a cost. As an upper middle manager in telecommunications pointed out, "You sometimes have to pretend to be a shark, to avoid having your loyalty tested." Otherwise, you may be "branded," as Roberta found out. "Now I'm ostracized, and they say I don't have a strategic view of things. Give me a break."

Playing for the Good Guys. The third strategy, adopted by 18 interviewees at some point in their careers, was to actively seek out employers whose mission or culture they could believe in. This group was passionate about customers, employees, organizational transformation, or businesses that "do well by doing good." Alex, a young product manager for a consumer software company, loved his job finding new ways to make life easier for customers. "What I get excited about is creating something my mom can use, that could maybe save someone like her an hour a day, so they can focus on something else. If I can make just a little bit of difference in people's lives, that's what I'm working for. I get a real sense of meaning out of serving our customers."

Yet Alex's passion for customers had recently got him into trouble. "[My team was] designing a product to meet the needs of our business, not the needs of our customers. We were looking for a way to get more money out of our customers, but

not necessarily to give them something that they would want to pay more for. We were talking to customers, but we weren't listening to them! I knew it was going to blow up in our faces. I felt I had to speak up, which they saw as making trouble and going against their 'quick fix' of turning around the business. Finally, I transferred out." This strategy can lead people to painful dilemmas in which they are forced to make trade-offs between their passion and the rewards — either money or recognition — that they expect.

A senior executive in the cosmetics industry discovered this when he was offered a promotion out of a job as environmental quality director. "This is a conflict for me. I would rather not leave the position I love, and where I'm making a difference. But I need to build up enough money to retire. If I put my love for the environment first, my wife would shoot me."

Leaving the Game. At some point, 12 of the people I talked to had left their organizations to preserve their integrity. Interestingly, this often happened when organizations with the highest aspirations contradicted themselves. After Jim, the sales director of a carpet company, moved his family across the country to sell an inspiring new product line, the company changed its portfolio approach. "I took this role because I believed in our commitment to environmentally sustainable products. But now they've changed my job responsibilities and I have to sell the normal [product line] as well, which is the worst offender in terms of landfill. Now I don't see how I can tell the sustainability story to our customers in good conscience." Not too long

after the interview, he went to work for a competitor.

Sometimes, leaving the game meant leaving corporate life altogether. "I tried to help the organization see the larger purpose we could serve," recalled Amrita, the senior VP of innovation and strategic marketing. "But when I began to realize that we weren't going to change in a sustainable way, I couldn't stay. I'm not the kind of person who can set limits, or only invest part of myself." She is now working as a consultant to nonprofit organizations and academic institutions. This strategy proved somewhat successful for

"I have left my role voluntarily as CEO twice for moral reasons. The first time was because the board was trying to force me into a short-sighted and damaging strategy, and the second was because I was personally debilitating the executive team."

What enabled people to feel independent enough to take these risks? Often it was the choice to limit material wants. As this same CEO put it, "I could be true to myself those two times I needed to quit because we kept our expenses low. Before we even bought a car or a home, we saved a year's worth of

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Amrita, but it also meant reducing her income. Not everybody I talked to had the financial stability, or the courage, to take that kind of chance.

Playing a Bigger Game. In her book *Value Shift: Why Companies Must Merge Social and Financial Imperatives to Achieve Superior Performance* (McGraw-Hill, 2002), Lynn Sharp Paine asks us to confront the uncomfortable question, "Although we often say 'ethics pays,' what if it didn't?" Eleven people among those I interviewed seemed to have confronted this tension directly, and resolved that their values came first. They stayed in the corporate world, but jealously guarded their ability to say no when moral issues were at stake. The former CEO of several European consumer brand companies described such hard choices as almost routine.

living expenses. What people often don't realize is that true security lies in healthy family relationships and access to our own psychic resources." Having this security gave people the freedom to stand up, even at company meetings. "I put my badge on the table at one team meeting," an HR director told me. "I told them I didn't want to continue talking the talk if we weren't going to walk the walk. That really seemed to shift the conversation for the better."

Less focused on "winning" in traditional terms, those playing a bigger game seem to hold a subtle but unmistakable conviction that what really matters is much larger than business — whether it is human potential, spirituality, society, or the natural environment — but that the corporate world is one

of the most effective places from which to change the world at large. "I estimate it will take 150 years to transition to fully sustainable sources of energy. Hopefully, my company will be a significant part of that transition," says Bill, the CEO of an alternative fuels company. "That is what I work for every day and what I try to get the analysts to see when I give the quarterly earnings reports. But if we fail, that will be progress, too. Someone else will pick up the challenge, and they will be able to learn from what we have accomplished. So, you see, none of this can be meaningless."

The Personal Deal

I began my interviews wondering if others experienced the moral tensions of corporate life that I sensed. These interviews led me to conclude that it *is* possible to "make a difference without getting killed." We do not have to leave the corporate world to keep our integrity or live a life of purpose.

Nor does playing a bigger game require us to take on our organizations in a confrontational way — a choice not many of us are prepared to make. Instead, we have to "deal with the devil" more personally: to acknowledge the all-too-real pressures to compromise while simultaneously strengthening our ability to move past them by preserving our options, viewing our work in a larger context, and extending our time horizons by recognizing that it could take months or years to accomplish some of our goals.

Although this might seem to be an individual journey, it could also be an inherent part of life in a highly evolved organization. Over and over I heard it was a "tap on the shoulder" that awoke people to their potential. Jim, the sales director, told me, "Lisa [a colleague] would ask me, in a friendly way, 'Is this really what you want to be doing?' Now, I preach the story of sustainability every day." If corporations are made up not of people, but of "parts of people," as anthropologist Gregory Bateson once suggested, what parts of ourselves might we encourage each other to bring into play?

There is more than a personal imperative behind this question. Corporations have become so powerful in their ability to affect human society that, in many people's view, they effectively eclipse national governments. If that is true, then every individual's ability to win the devil's bargain matters to all of us. The way that companies use or misuse their power is determined, moment by moment, by the way we as individuals play this game. ✚

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