



THE BUSINESS ETHICS FIELD GUIDE

Challenge 9: Loyalty

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

Relationships matter. We all build important connections with our family, friends, coworkers, bosses, neighbors and others. These connections impact our choices in many ways and we certainly should be influenced by our important relationships. After all, they were established with an investment of time, care and effort. But to what extent should loyalty to a relationship override or influence how we act when someone we value makes a request?



Most societies value loyalty. In fact, it's vital so that teams (such as sports teams, military teams and work teams) can function effectively. That's positive. But beware of those who trust blindly or expect your blind loyalty regardless of the situation. Loyalty to people is admirable, but loyalty to values must take precedence over loyalty to people.

For this dilemma, we are not talking about relationships formed of a legal obligation like a contract. Instead the loyalty dilemma springs from the unwritten obligations we have for others usually because of a special connection we have with them. However, just because these obligations are unwritten does not make them any less compelling.

Beneficial vs. Toxic Loyalty

Loyalty is usually triggered in those situations where you have benefited from someone else's generosity, care or concern. When a coworker supports you, helps when your workload increases and unquestionably covers for you when you have to be away from work, then loyalty is built. Exactly what we owe others in return is hard to define. Since our duties to others are often unclear, the boundaries of loyalty tend to be vague. It can be very hard to know exactly what or how much to give in order to be loyal in our relationships.

It is sometimes helpful to think of loyalty as a form of social capital. Loyalty is how we build value in our relationships. We appreciate how others have helped us in the past, so we help them when the time comes. Reciprocal relationships fill gaps where things like contracts or rules don't quite fit.

Loyalties are often tested. Sometimes we are placed in the position of choosing among competing loyalties. For example, imagine you promised your family that you would take them to the park on Saturday, but your good friend asks you to help him move on that same Saturday. We have all experienced the moment when we are asked to do too much by a friend or

13 ETHICAL DILEMMAS

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

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Someone in power is asking you to do something unethical.
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Conflicting commitments force you to choose.
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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.
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You could grant forgiveness, but you don't know if you should.



family member. We have seen those commercials where the friend who needs some contract work asks you to get them three quotes, check the references, conduct background checks and schedule the work. In all of these situations, we are asked to sacrifice. The loyalty dilemma makes us decide how much we are willing to sacrifice in order to honor a relationship. In asking how much we will sacrifice, we often realize how important the relationship is in our life. Some are extremely important and in those relationships, we are likely to do almost anything we are asked.

Generally, the right answer to the loyalty dilemma is one that helps you remain loyal. Remember that loyalty and trust belong together. When you face a question of loyalty, your decision should reflect the kind of trustworthy person you want to be.

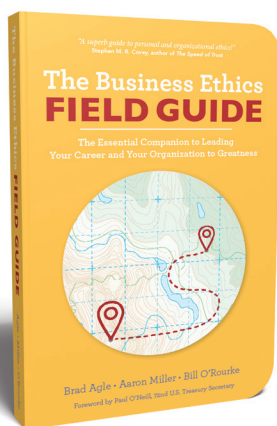
Ask these questions when your loyalty is being tested:

1. Has the individual shown loyalty to you?

Loyalty is reciprocal. Has the person asking something of you done much to earn your loyalty? This perspective may seem callous, but it is an important distinction. Be sure to fully consider and appreciate the loyalty you have been shown.

2. Did you ask for this person's loyalty?

Sometimes people will give us things we did not ask for and may not need. Often their motive is to try to build a closer relationship. Sometimes that motive can be positive, but if their motive is to get something from you in the future, the motive may not be so pure. When you accept another person's kindness, you often feel an obligation to reciprocate. But remember, the strongest loyalty is based on mutual benefit not unasked favors.



3. Is this person taking unfair advantage of you?

Your loyalty cannot be limitless. Sometimes others will ask for more than they have the right to ask. Loyalty is rooted in trustworthiness and reciprocity. Is the individual being trustworthy in their request to you? Is the person asking more from you than they have ever offered in the past or are likely to offer in the future?

4. Would they want your loyalty if they knew all of the costs?

Sometimes people ask more of us than they realize. Without knowing all the facts, they may make a request that turns out to be a huge burden. We may feel bad pointing this out or asking for a reprieve because we don't want to look disloyal. In these situations, we are unintentionally taken advantage of by the other party. Open, honest communication would put both parties on the same level of understanding.

5. Does showing loyalty sacrifice your integrity?

Loyalty is an ethically dangerous principle because it invites you to give your decision-making power to someone else. For example, what if a good friend asks you to lie or cheat? Do you lie or cheat out of loyalty to that

person? Showing loyalty to others is admirable. However, we must also have loyalty to our value—like honesty. Loyalty to our values must take precedence over loyalty to people, even when it's difficult.

Loyalty is essential in organizations. Trusting, reciprocal relationships help us do business every day, but it's easy to misdirect loyalty in a way that lets people off the hook. It's also easy to forget how much others have done for you. Don't allow that to happen. Be loyal.

Final Thoughts

Remember to choose loyalty to your values as your top priority. Loyalty to people is important, but not over loyalty to values. You are still able to be trustworthy this way. Additionally, remember the importance of leading through shared commitment. Cultivate those who are loyal to the values you share. Together you will sacrifice to protect those important principles. Work on correcting over-reliance and let others know if they are counting on you more than they should. Don't wait for the moment of crises. And finally, inspire loyalty. Be worthy of loyalty and you will get it. Be trustworthy and generous. Value the important people in your life and you will be valued in return. ✪



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