

My Friend the Felon

No, I don't have one of those - to my knowledge they're all law abiding citizens. A little embellished I know, but the headline does have relevance to this little piece. We see this "principle" all too often in our working life and some of us mortals (my hand is up) are guilty of allowing it to creep into our own management repertoire. Especially when performance is measured by hard cold KPIs, the worst being the sales, margin and profit variety. Hit your targets, and you can do no wrong, you walk on water, your No 2 are considered a Chanel No 5 – in fact, the greater you exceed your targets, the greater the chances of canonisation at the next pope conference. To your superior, you're the best friend – maybe even a marriage proposal. There is never a problem, they'll turn a blind eye to any of your faults, obsessions, lack of reports, unauthorized expenses and sloppy timekeeping and yes...even criminal charges. What charges? A vicious, spiteful rumor. Conversely, if your results are not where they should be, everything you do is all wrong, you can't swim, no amount of Chanel will fix the smell – your sins are way beyond the remit of any known religion. A sudden drop in market conditions, a major order has fallen through, abnormally high warranty issues maybe given a hearing – but listening? In fact, the law of this principle is quite simple; friendship and blindness are directly proportional to degree of improvement over target. Anti-friendship and distorted forensics is directly proportional to degree of shortfall to target. A lazy (and lousy) way of managing.

What drives a CEO, manager or other "leader" to do this? Prepared to bypass and ignore the values and policies set by the company and proceed to turn a blind eye when it suits. Obviously, it's a driven obsession on results and personal reward. They're not going to let some "minor" lack of compliance to abstract values and cumbersome procedures get in the way. They believe they can get away it – after all, who's the winner here? Everyone knows this does not define true leadership. But yet, we all know it happens and if we think long and hard about it, we'd also agree that at some point in time, it all comes home to roost with consequences.

Let's make it quite clear, results and full accountability are all important, there is no argument there. The concern is the consequences of ignoring the values, policies and procedures. The impact of playing favorites. And consequences of little to no interrogation, analysis and true understanding on why the results are great or bad.

What does a business do about it? Of course, very difficult if the CEO is party to this conduct. Continuing to reinforce basic leadership principles will go some way to improving attitudes.

1. It starts from the top. If the CEO and the senior management team wants to be taken seriously, it must have the fortitude and transparency to apply the values and policies – equally and unhitched to targets.
2. Each manager must have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the layer immediately below their sub-ordinate manager. Whilst it's fine in theory to lead and manage purely on results and "management by exception", in practice, too much autonomy can lead to irreversible damage.
3. Maintain the politeness, respect and balance at all levels, in all situations with all employees and only deal in facts and not the person. Maintain an amicable relationship.

The eradication of this "principle" is easier said than done – some will always view profitability and pure survival as independent to any foyer-posted company values. In fact the opposite is true and great leadership ensures compromise is not an option.

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