

The Management Corner: Are You Acting With 'Integrity' or Just Sabotaging Yourself?

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As a savvy administrator, you would not inflate enrollment numbers in an official report, use a departmental printer to produce political-campaign brochures, or question the competence of an institutional leader in a conversation with a key donor. Those are irresponsible activities that would get you in trouble and damage your career — and you are certainly smart enough to avoid them.

Why? Because you are highly responsible, and you know that means acting with integrity. It means being conscientious and judicious with institutional resources. It means offering appropriate warnings, keeping others safe from harm, and choosing the right course of action — even when doing any of those things may make you unpopular.

If you consider yourself a card-carrying member of the responsible camp, however, it may come as a surprise that acting with "integrity" can derail, rather than enhance, your own career. I'm not suggesting you stop acting with integrity and think only of yourself. Rather, I'm suggesting that some actions that feel like you're "doing the right thing," may not be so right after all.

This month the [Management Corner series](#) looks at five behaviors — common among those who work in higher education — that seem highly responsible, but may actually harm your career and may not be very good for your colleagues or your campus, either.

You feel the need to alert people to what failed before. Your new provost wants to completely reinvent the general-education curriculum and has mapped out a plan to launch the redesign quickly. You agree that the curriculum needs a makeover, but you can't help but notice that the provost's new plan looks remarkably similar to a failed effort that was attempted 10 years ago. You feel obligated to detail the many reasons the earlier redesign was unsuccessful and outline how it contributed to the former provost's ignominious departure.

People who think they have developed novel ideas typically resent those who utter phrases like, "That will never work," or, "We tried that before." So banish those kinds of remarks from your vocabulary.

What to try instead: Before pointing out all the reasons why a proposal will be met with resistance, think about whether the world has changed since the last proposal was introduced and whether circumstances have changed enough that it might be better received today. If you truly see danger ahead, position yourself as a resource — rather than a naysayer. Offer the provost a list of lessons learned from the last redesign that might be helpful in moving this new effort forward.

You believe in standing on principle. It is good to have values and opinions about what is right and wrong. Every organization needs people courageous enough to speak truth to power. There is no question that those brave enough to question the integrity of a course of action can prompt a group to make better decisions.

The question is: Are you climbing onto your soapbox too often? Constant position-taking can be perceived as disruptive and may earn you a label as a person who is inflexible and unreasonable.

What to try instead: First, recognize that some issues don't matter enough to waste your

valuable political capital on trying to fix them. Even when an issue is truly important, it is best to use outrage sparingly. In general, most people respond better to inquiry rather than advocacy. Rather than enumerate the many reasons an idea is flawed, ask a series of well-spaced questions to help others realize that they are headed in a bad direction. If that doesn't work, express your concern about where the conversation is headed as a strategy for going on record about your position. Then spend the rest of the time listening. It is possible you will learn something that changes your mind.

You try to honor all requests. Do you find *everything* interesting? Do you secretly think you are smarter than most people and, therefore, especially qualified to add value to every group you join? Is it possible that declining requests is uncomfortable for you?

Many motivations may drive you to join every committee, accept every request, and agree to every speaking or meeting invitation. But being spread too thin will compromise your ability to focus on your most strategic work. Saying "yes" to everything may also deny colleagues — and those who report to you — an opportunity to learn, grow, and increase their own visibility. It is also worth noting that hyper-visibility may also create envy among those who are less likely to be invited or included.

What to try instead: Let someone else do it. With every opportunity, ask yourself the following:

- "Is my participation essential, or could someone else do this in my place?"
- "What is my motivation for accepting this request?"
- "Who might benefit from this opportunity?"

You focus on getting things done rather than fostering relationships. Progress is important to you, and you believe honoring deadlines to be essential. So rather than go to lunch with your colleagues or join an occasional happy-hour gathering, you work. And work. And work.

You think you are being responsible. Your colleagues likely find you annoying and standoffish.

It is good to have a reputation as reliable, productive, and effective on the job. But being known as the person who works more, and harder, than anyone else has a way of creating a distance between you and your colleagues. The people who work with you may feel pressure to mirror your behavior — and come to resent you for it. More important, working all the time may compromise your ability to build relationships with people who could actually help you get even more done, if you let them.

What to try instead: Forging trust-based relationships with a diverse network may actually make you more productive by giving you new insights or someone to call upon when you need a favor.

Certainly, having a psychological support team is critical for most of us. If relationship nurturing does not come naturally to you, make connecting with others a part of your regular to-do list. Each week, set a goal of having one lunch, one coffee meeting, and three quick workplace chats or email check-ins with colleagues. The visibility will be good for you, and a bit of interaction may help you learn something that will increase your impact.

You insist on integrity in others. You have high standards and you expect your senior colleagues, and especially your leaders, to be role models. When they disappoint you, you may feel it necessary to point out their failings and flaws to others.

But here's the thing: That kind of griping usually makes it back to the person you are criticizing. And when that happens, you may be shunned, you may find your job eliminated, or, at the very least, you may be the target of a counterattack.

What to try instead: Resist the urge to utter disparaging remarks about leaders or colleagues, or to spread gossip about their missteps. When you observe or hear about someone else's ethical lapses, appear puzzled or surprised. Rather than condemn their behavior, express curiosity about it and let everyone reach their own conclusions.

Do any of those examples of career self-sabotage look familiar to you? Have you noticed those behaviors in yourself or others? Being highly responsible is a valuable trait, but the way you express your personal values can often work against you, especially in highly political work cultures that prize "going along to get along."

If you find yourself losing ground in your current environment — and want to remain a part of it — begin to observe the behaviors of those who seem to be doing better than you are. Who are their allies? What is their ratio of heads-down work to socializing with others? How do they handle conflicting opinions? When do they take stands and when do they let issues slide?

The tools they are using to navigate the institutional culture may work for you, too.

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