

Little Things Can Mean A Lot

When we hear the term “ethics” used in reference to the workplace, most of us think about behaviors made at the corporate level. But each of us makes little decisions from time to time – decisions that test our honesty and integrity even if they don’t seem to. If you agree that “character is determined by what you do when no one is watching,” then consider some examples from the fictitious XYZ Company and think about what *you* would do.

- **Use the company copy machine for a noble but non business purpose?** Joe is on the publicity committee of a local charity that is embarking on a fund raising project and uses the company’s copy machine and paper to reproduce fliers for this good cause. The company has a firm policy against using the copy machine for non business purposes. Yet, Joe figures that since the copies are for a worthy cause and not personal gain, it’s OK. What would *you* do?
- **Punch in without coming in right away?** Employees are required to “punch in” at 7AM each day. Eddie’s wife drives him to work and Eddie will occasionally punch the time clock at 7AM then go back to sit in the car with his wife for a few minutes. Eddie believes that since he works harder than most other employees in his department, he is justified in what he does. What would *you* do?
- **Be silent in the face of misconduct by others?** New hires in Phil’s department are frequently subjected to humiliating treatment by their co-workers. Phil doesn’t participate in

this hazing behavior nor does he feel particularly compelled to intervene since it’s a longtime “tradition.” What would *you* do?

- **Remain silent when a helpful manager is criticized?** After work, Sarah will sometimes socialize with her co-workers from the IT department. The topic of conversation is usually the IT manager, who the co-workers “bash and trash.” This manager has been very supportive of Sarah and demonstrated great patience when she was new to the job. While somewhat uncomfortable with the conversation, Sarah nonetheless does not defend her manager, figuring that what is being said constitutes “free speech”. What would *you* do?



In each of the fictitious examples above, the employees can present compelling defenses for their actions. The larger point is that all of us will inevitably arrive at an ethical “crossroads” in our workplaces. First, consider “Does my employer address this behavior in an official policy statement?” If not, we must rely on an inner compass. The question will then be “What should *I* do?” Author Lindsay Swinton suggests in her blog (www.mftrou.com) that we consider the following to determine which road to take: “Could you comfortably explain your decision to your mother? To the man on the street? On television? If not, you may have to re-think your decision before taking action.”