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The Human Tendency to Cut Corners

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NICE® & PROFESSOR DAN ARIELY

What is the challenge?

About twenty years of research on dishonesty has taught us that in our daily life, as well as in organizations, there are many people who cheat just a little bit and not many who cheat in extreme ways.

One of the main reasons these small ways of cheating are so common is because of conflicts of interests. As we go about our workday, there are often tradeoffs between getting things done quickly and getting them done right. This conflict of interest can make it very tempting to cut corners—not just for our own selfish benefit, but in order to get the work done in a timely manner. On top of that, many of these "shortcuts" seem harmless because we can't see exactly who we hurt by taking them.

And that's exactly why a lot of us, under conditions of time constraints and pressure to get the job done, are likely to cut corners and bend the rules. Because each of these actions seem so innocuous, we are able to tell ourselves that we are good, honest, and wonderful people who are just getting things done.

Yet, over time, and given their frequency, such dishonest behaviors can create greater damage to companies. Just think about the recent scandals and ask yourself if these started with the intention of corporate fraud or with conflicts of interests and a slippery slope.

It is sad, but important to realize that we all have this tendency to cut corners. And the more we do it, and the more we get away with it, the more we learn that the world is just fine when we bend the rules. In this loop of acting badly and not getting caught, cutting corners becomes self-reinforcing, and we're more likely to continue behaving badly and even extend our repertoire of cutting corners. When we have conflicts of interests, coupled with the inability to see the consequences of these seemingly harmless violations, it can start us a on a path towards even worse transgressions.

Consider the example of texting and driving. Even if we know it's risky, one day we choose to quickly reply to a message while we're stuck at a red light. Then, having seen that nothing bad happened, we might do it again, or even start replying to messages and checking Facebook while we're driving.

In the workplace, cutting corners can mean a lot of different things. A doctor may feel pressure to see all of the patients in her waiting room during a specific time allotted for each person, not giving each of them the full check-up they may need. An employee at a call center might skip asking a customer about an upgrade or whether they have other problems they want to address in order to save themselves time. These individuals may know that they should do these things, but they also have time pressure and it's easier in the moment to just succumb to the time pressures and move on to the next task.

What is the solution?

In the moments we're tempted to cut corners, we need a mechanism to help us overcome these temptations.

The code of conduct should never be fuzzy, as it's more difficult for us to see when we are violating it. When we have clear, well-communicated norms about what the correct behavior is and what is expected of employees, it's more difficult to rationalize cutting corners. For example, if we can't continue on to the next task before finishing the current task in the right way, we are more likely to do that task the way it's meant to be done.

In other words, when we put in place clear procedures and rules, it's much more psychologically difficult to break them in order to save time. Not giving ourselves the room and permission to cut corners may be painful in the short term, but it is certainly much better for us and for business in the long term.

What does the research say?

We like to think of ourselves as good, honest people (1). However, studies have shown that we're able to keep this positive image of ourselves as long as we only cheat a little bit.

In a series of studies known as "matrix experiments," participants are given 20 simple math problems and asked to solve as many as they can in five minutes. They are then asked to put their test paper in a shredder, before letting an experimenter know how many problems they solved. For each problem they say that they solved, they received $1 (2,3).

What they didn't know, was that the shredder only destroys the edges of their test paper - allowing the experimenter to compare how many problems they got right to how many they said that they solved. Almost 40,000 people participated in these types of experiments, but only 20 claimed to have solved all the problems—costing the researchers about $400. The far larger impact, however, came from the 70% of participants (around 28,000 people) who cheated "only a little bit" but ended up costing the researchers more than $50,000.

In addition, because we don't like to challenge the view of ourselves as good people, we are better at justifying small indiscretions than major violations. As a result, we're more likely to "start small" and build up to more serious behavior than to suddenly do something very bad out of the blue (4).

This "slippery slope" towards worse behavior isn't always obvious to us. In fact, it often happens without our awareness. And it's not just us: Lab studies by researchers such as Francesca Gino and Max Bazerman have shown that people are more likely to accept others' unethical behavior when they get slowly worse over time instead of in one abrupt shift (5).

Given that cutting corners and slowly sliding towards worse behaviors is relatively easy to do, how can organizations set up systems that help us avoid transgressions?

If we feel like we are able to cut corners without consequences, we are more likely to do it. There are many cues we take to determine whether there will be consequences for these actions.

The REVISE framework, developed by Ayal, Gino, Barkan and Ariely (6) offers three useful principles to help us think about these cues:

1) Reminding. People take advantage of grey areas to justify transgressions. If the rules are fuzzy, it's easier to argue that we weren't sure what the correct behavior was. We want to remind people about what the correct behavior is, and also about their own standards.

2) Visibility. If we don't have anyone holding us accountable to our actions, we feel like we can get away with transgressions. More visibility also helps shape social norms, and if we see others do the right thing, we are more likely to do it.

3) Self Engagement. People usually care about being a good person but think about it mostly in abstract terms. Help employees become aware of temptations and to commit to behaving better because they want to stay true to their own values.

What does this mean?

To avoid the slippery slope of cutting corners, companies should recognize that employees need mechanisms to help protect them against their very human tendencies. When we have a lot of tasks competing for our attention, it's quite easy to let our standards slip. And if companies create work environments that let it happen, it will harm them in the long run.

To create such mechanisms, we need to identify the moments where conflicts of interest might lead employees to cut corners. These are the moments where we can intervene to help protect us from making decisions that harm both the employees and the company in the long term.

Then companies need to address the cues that suggest cutting corners is acceptable. Here, it's useful to keep three principles in mind: reminding, visibility, and self-engagement.

That means doing things such as creating clearly communicated processes and rules that help remind us to complete the task at hand before moving on to the next thing, establishing clear social norms about what the correct behavior is, and creating systems that hold us accountable for our behavior.

The NICE Perspective

When under pressure, humans are wired to cut corners, with potentially detrimental results to businesses. But what if this could be gently circumvented with smart desktop automation technology?

NEVA (NICE Employee Virtual Attendant), is a personal desktop robot with built in real-time responsiveness, perfectly designed to prevent employees from taking short cuts. NEVA prompts and guides employees in real-time, in a context specific manner, to ensure that they are fully aligned to the specific policies and procedures of an organization, by intelligently enforcing important, compliance driven tasks in real time.

In addition, NICE Desktop Analytics is an effective tool to leverage when organizations need to accurately identify compliance or process driven breaches, giving the organization a holistic view of where employees need more guidance for staying on the right process path. And with a personal desktop robot by their side, cutting corners is less likely to happen.

References

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