

Loyal Dissent

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[December 13, 2013] There comes a time in every leader's career when one must face the prospect that one's boss has acted *out of bounds* on some behavior or decision. As a subordinate, it is our obligation to present a dissenting view of what should take place but do so in a manner that adheres to allegiance to that boss and the organization. I call this "loyal dissent."

The decision to expose a problem so that corrective action is taken, is a trait of a good leader. The judgment to address poor decision-making or expose misconduct presents a choice. It can be addressed internally (for example, within the organization) or externally (to regulators, the media, law enforcement, etc.). The later are called whistleblowers.

Addressed here is the former, where a person decides to deal with the issue internally – loyal dissenters.

There are three points to make. First, a good leader cannot let pass a behavior or decision that is improper, just because senior leaders, higher in the organization, are involved. Overlooking something that is illegal, immoral, or unethical is, in itself, just as unacceptable. Ethically, action must be taken.

Second, bringing this to the attention of the right person is not easy. The reason is that anytime a serious issue requires a leader to intervene, means that there are risks of reprisal against that person – being fired, demoted, etc. Therefore, it requires [moral courage](#). Moral courage and loyal dissent are intertwined concepts.

Third and one of the more important aspects of loyal dissent, is *how* a leader is to address the problem. The leader can address it directly with the offending person and work within the organization to resolve it before going outside the organization. There will be exceptions of course when the problem is a criminal offense.

Loyal dissent means working within the system to resolve problems. Sometimes this may mean the system itself must change. Regardless, the technique is of utmost importance. Do so with [respect](#) and [humility](#); your actions are for the betterment of all, not yourself.

Here are some tips for the loyal dissenter:

1. Ensure the issue is truly worthy. If it is important, then one should act.
2. Focus on the issue, not the person. Personalizing the issue can have negative effects.
3. Be objective and balanced. Being emotionally involved can distort one's approach.
4. Expect change or action by others to be slow.
5. Be early. Waiting until late to present your side can work against your position.
6. Recognize you may be wrong.

There are many books and articles on "whistleblowers," but few on "loyal dissenters."