



WORDS ON WISE MANAGEMENT

Willful blindness: a leadership and cultural downfall

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Willful blindness is a legal term that means there is information you could and should know but have elected not to know. Deliberate indifference and contrived ignorance also are used to describe the phenomenon. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of willful blindness in the world today. Willful blindness causes the downfall of an organization's leadership and culture. Here are some examples of willful blindness:

- Banks approving mortgages for people they know cannot afford them long-term;
- Hospitals scheduling medical interns to work 24-hour shifts when they know the safety problems caused by a lack of sleep;
- The Catholic Church ignoring the child abuse that occurred under its proverbial roof for decades; and
- The Enron and Arthur Andersen scandals.

Each of those examples occurred because at least one person turned a blind eye. In many instances, the consequences are catastrophic when many people turn a blind eye, especially in the workplace.

Scared silent?

Multiple studies show that 85 percent of employees in companies all over the world respond "yes" when asked questions like "Are there issues in the workplace that people are afraid to bring up?" Why do 85 percent of employees respond yes to that question? That is an awful lot of silence! You can't fix what you refuse to acknowledge.

Willful blindness can hurt companies in a variety of areas—for example, productivity, safety, innovation, and ethics. We see it in our workplaces every day. Executives decide not to survey their employees because they are going through a challenging time and are afraid of what they will find or they decide to conduct a survey and the results are not positive. As a result, executives put the surveys in a drawer and hide them, hoping no one will ever know about them, even though employees already know what the company's culture is like.

Willful blindness is the employee who works at a hospital and doesn't speak up regarding an issue

even though he knows it's related to patient safety. It's the organization that has an accountant who has clearly manipulated payroll to avoid taxes and is now being garnished by the IRS yet still allows her to keep her job. It's the executive who keeps a salesperson solely because she brings in money even though she is difficult, destroys teamwork, and breaks cultural mores.

Although we have whistleblower laws in place to protect employees and give them the freedom to speak up, legislation, rules, and standards won't solve the problem. The only way to remove willful blindness from the workplace is through culture, leadership, and a strong hiring and selection process.

Culture cure

Your culture has to create transparency and reduce fear in the workplace. Leaders must support that culture by holding employees accountable in a firm and fair way without berating them or being ugly, difficult, or obstinate. Leaders must learn from mistakes. Cultures and leaders must reward employees for speaking clearly, frankly, and professionally. Pay special attention to employees you bring into your company. Are they supportive of your culture? Will they continue to improve your culture? Will they strengthen or hinder your culture?

Here are some key steps to remove willful blindness:

- Focus on creating self-awareness through feedback tools and programs.
- Use data to make decisions.
- Create an environment where people are encouraged to play devil's advocate.
- Use benchmarks to determine whether employees are able to tell the truth or whether they are suffering from burnout and help identify problem areas in your workplace.
- Use external resources to help you see your blind spots and encourage you to remove tunnel vision.



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