

Survey

About 1/5 of US Workers Pilfer Office Supplies

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FT. LAUDERDALE, FL

A new survey shows that about one in five people admits pilfering items from work – and only 21% say they regret it.

"It's amazing how many people admit to this," said Brent Short, managing director of Spherion, the Florida-based based staffing company that conducted the survey of more than 2,000 people, according to a report from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. "A lot of them really don't think of it as theft."

The Scripps News Service cites Duquesne University ethicist James Weber as saying attitudes about theft of minor items such as pencils or Post-It notes are a "textbook case" of how people view ethics from the standpoint of consequences or principles.

"From the perspective of consequences, taking a pencil home, perhaps to give to your child for school, will probably cost your company mere pennies -- making it easy to justify. But from the standpoint of ethical principles, it's still theft -- and it's wrong."

The Kansas City Star notes that of the surveyed workers, the highest-paid

typically stole more than the ones who earned less. ■



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Two Strikes and You're Out: Good Policy or Bad Metaphor?

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The Bible story of Daniel and the lions' den, is widely known. But few remember what got him there in the first place: a good king caught up in bad policy.

Daniel served as prime minister to King Darius -- to the envy of the other courtiers. They inveigled the king to sign an inalterable decree that punished anyone found worshipping

anything other than Darius himself. When Daniel put his religion first and continued his daily worship, he was reported. The king worked every way he could to save his friend, only to be forced by his own policy to throw him to the lions.

The story exemplifies courage, divine action, and just deserts -- Daniel stands his ground, the lions shut their mouths, he's rescued, and his accusers are thrown in instead. In a contempo-

see *Policy on back*

Policy - continued from front

rary way, it's also a story about the need for sound policy -- as is the story I heard from the assistant head of an independent day school for boys.

John (not his real name) told me he'd been chaperoning the annual prom. Held on the school campus, it was a joint event with a nearby girls' school. As John walked the hallways that night, he fell into conversation with one of the students, one he liked very much who had an exemplary record. To his surprise, John smelled alcohol on the boy's breath.

On several issues, including drinking, the school took a very strong stand: Under its "two-strikes-you're-out" policy, out literally meant expulsion from school. John confronted the student, who confessed that his date had brought liquor to the prom and shared it with him. John sent them both home, but took no further action that night.

This was the first time the boy had been caught drinking, so whatever needed to be sorted out with his parents could wait until the next week.

On Monday, John spoke to the boy's mother. To his great relief, she wasn't angry or defensive, but friendly, apol-

ogetic, and grateful for the school's stand. Then, as they continued their chat, she began recounting a recent conversation with her son, who told her that weeks before the prom a friend had hidden liquor in his school locker and given him a drink.

The moment she began the story, John told me, his heart sank. "Why is she telling me this?!" he said to himself. Without that information, the prom event was strike one. Now it was suddenly strike two and the punishment was inalterably explicit, a young man must be expelled despite an exemplary college-bound career.

John's right-versus-right dilemma pitted truth against loyalty and justice against mercy. On one hand, he had every reason to come down hard on the boy: The glaring truth was that this

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was indeed a second offense for someone who, while he hadn't been the instigator, had on both occasions been a willing co-conspirator. Was a trend developing here that John, as a matter of justice, needed to squelch firmly?

On the other hand, John had learned of this earlier lapse only because of the mother's admirable candor. What kind of signal would it send to the other parents when it became known (as it surely would) that the reward for such honesty was a devastating penalty that could significantly affect her son's future? With this precedent, would any parent ever again speak up to the administration about things that most mattered? Would they fear retribution when they were seeking assistance? Didn't John owe her some loyalty, some appreciation for her helpfulness? Wasn't this a case requiring mercy,

Words from the Wise

"Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point."

– C.S. Lewis

(novelist & essayist, 1898-1963)

where a punishment was needed that better fit the circumstances?

Unlike Daniel's story, this was not a matter of life and death, nor did it require divine intervention. But John, too, was caught in the vice-grip of a policy that left him little room for creativity. Why? Largely because of the way the school defined the word "out." Did "out" have to mean expulsion? Or should the policy have been, "Two strikes and you will be subject to a punishment that is swift, sure, and more severe than you had hoped." Granted, that's a less catchy phrase than the original, which is borrowed from baseball's three-strikes rule. The problem is that in the borrowing, the phrase ran afoul of its own metaphor. All "out" means in baseball is that you retire from the plate, to come back again later. The school had turned it into a terminal, life-changing condition -- perhaps without ever giving the word the thought it deserved.

But that's what a good policy should offer to good executives: room for thought. In the realm of ethics, each case will be different and the differences may or may not matter. Justice properly sets up expectations about behaviors and penalties for infractions. By contrast, mercy is about exceptions, which John's story may have been.

Bottom line? Well-crafted policy takes off the table any number of otherwise agonizing right-versus-right dilemmas. Poor policy, by contrast, can generate them by the thousands. ■

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