

Obedience at Work at Work

“Because I said so!” Aren’t we all familiar with that response to questioning an order? I remember hearing that from my parents and saying the same thing to each of my children at some time. As an administrator I remember using that phrase on a few occasions with a persistently questioning subordinate whose tenacity outran my patience. Even more, I know I wished at times I could just say that and not have to explain further the rationale or purpose for a directive.

Based on our first conscious contact with the need to obey, we tend to think of obedience as something we are blindly bound to do. Yet I think it is the questioning, the persistent questioning, that points to the true nature of obedience. Obedience is not blind. Obedience is a freely made decision to conform to a legitimately given directive knowing the options to that directive and the consequences of each option as well as any moral and/or civic laws that may apply to the situation.

So the questioning child, growing in awareness of his/her freedom to choose, seeks to know the options and the consequences. So, too, the persistently questioning employee. So, too, should we seek to know the options and consequences to directives given in our “workplaces,” whatever that may be. We have an obligation to learn and legitimate authority should freely inform.

Beyond the options and consequences, there are the higher obligations of moral and civil law. The person giving orders must have legitimate authority to give those particular orders and those orders must not be contrary to applicable institutional policies, civil law, or divine law. Legitimate authority has the obligation to prove its authority and to remain within the law. People being asked to obey have the obligation to verify the authority and to inform themselves of the applicable policies, laws, and morality. One cannot shed responsibility by appealing to ignorance as a defense for obeying an immoral/unjust command. Indeed, obedience to higher authority/law may require the courage to blow-the-whistle on the immoral, unjust, or illegal practices or directives.

The commandants say to honor (obey) our parents. Yet, if a parent is intoxicated and we have taken his/her car keys, do we obey him/her and return the keys when he/she commands us to do so? Of course, not. Higher authority directs us to keep the parent and others on the road safe by keeping the keys. The same type of situation arises when parents are no longer able to drive safely.

If the boss wants to get rid of employee for reasons other than performance and the boss tells us to evaluate the employee’s performance as “Unsatisfactory” when it is not, what do we do? The boss is a legitimate authority but the order to lie is outside his/her authority and a violation of a higher law.

On the other hand, if the boss tells us to do our job or any part of it in a way different than what we are accustomed, obedience is appropriate assuming the change is not a violation of a higher authority/law and we know the consequences of obeying and not-obeying. In such a case we need to get our ego out of the way and have the humility to obey.

Obedience to authority cannot be used to justify lying, stealing, cheating, or any action that would be immoral or illegal if we chose to do it without being ordered. Obedience is a choice with consequences just as disobedience is a choice with consequences. Knowing the consequences, we must choose in the direction of the highest laws, love God and love they neighbor.

OBEDIENCE — A Faith Based Value at Work

1. What does applying the faith-based value of obedience in your workplace mean to you? What do you think it would mean to those with whom you work? How does its meaning change for your different workplaces, for example, home or where you volunteer?
2. Why is it important to gain an understanding of obedience in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
3. How do/could you apply the concept of obedience in your workplace(s)?
4. What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based obedience in your workplace(s)? How would the workplace sound different? Look different? Feel different?
5. What first step are you willing to take this week?