

THE DANGER OF FEAR-BASED DECISIONS

By Rick Boxx

Fear, as we all know, can be a strong influence in shaping our behavior. But have you ever considered the effect fear can have on the choices we make in the workplace?

A Barna Group study revealed 17 percent of people surveyed say that they make many of their ethical decisions out of fear. They arrive at decisions not out of strong convictions about what is right and proper, but rather out of a desire to avoid undesirable consequences of choosing differently.

This was true in my own experience not long after my own business career was getting started. Early on as a CPA, because of a past mistake I had made, I was afraid of losing my job. So when a boss told me to do something illegal for a client, my fear surfaced. Although I knew what I was being asked to do was wrong, I conceded and did as I was told to avoid being fired.

I never forgot that episode and although I never had to face disciplinary measures, it caused me to rethink how I made my choices, both at work and in my personal life. Fear, I decided, should never be a justifying factor for any breach of proper ethical conduct.

Of course, fear does not always lead to illegal or unethical behavior. We make investment decisions based on fear, believing our financial well-being is at stake. When confronting a formidable competitor in the quest to attract an important customer, we might make promises we know cannot be met. We put in extraordinary hours at work, jeopardizing our health and sacrificing priority time with our families because we fear not being able to meet the expectations of our supervisors.

Fear may tempt us to do things we know are wrong, but we do not have to yield to that temptation. We can set boundaries, determining in advance those areas where we will not compromise our convictions and values. But even more important, we need to keep in mind the one we should allow to have the ultimate say in the things we do or decide not to do.

In the Bible's Old Testament, Deuteronomy 10:12 teaches, *"What does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul."*

The Scriptures talk much about the fear of God – not a fear that He in anger will strike us with a bolt of lightning, but a deep sense of reverence and awe, recognizing He has placed us where we are to honor and represent Him, and that He has entrusted the talents and skills we have for His purposes. The demands of our human superiors should never supersede those of the God we worship we serve.

Many experiences in the business and professional world have taught me an important truth: The best ethical decisions come from fearing and loving God more than fearing any boss, no matter how much power and influence he or she has in our organization. God's ways are always the best ways.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. The research study cited found that approximately one in six people consistently make their ethical decisions on the basis of fear. Have you found that to be the case where you work?
2. Has there ever been a time when you personally made a decision based on fear, fully aware it was the wrong thing to do? If you feel free to do so, explain the situation.
3. What does the term, "the fear of God," mean to you?
4. How can a healthy, reverent fear of God make a difference in how we respond to threatening circumstances, whether they involve the security of our jobs, the cultivation of a client, or making choices that would cause us to compromise cherished priorities and values?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Proverbs 12:21, 13:6, 24:5-6, 28:14; Isaiah 26:3, 41:10; Romans 8:12-15; 1 John 4:18