

The Upside and Downside of Exceptions

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“I’m sorry, sir, that’s our policy. We’re just not able to do what you’ve requested.”

“But can’t you see that the policy doesn’t make sense in this situation. Your policy wasn’t designed to handle these kinds of circumstances. Won’t you please make an exception in this case?”

Exceptions! We all have to deal with them. To the person wanting the exception, the justification is so very clear. As a leader, you often find yourself in the position of having to decide whether to follow your customary procedures or to do something that seems more appropriate for this situation.

I’m a strong advocate for reliable, repeatable processes. (Synonyms are many: systems, procedures, methods, practices, approaches, or even policies.) However, sometimes exceptions are appropriate.

Please train your team members to say something other than, “That’s our policy.” Individuals affected by your policies want to understand, “Why?” If the team member can’t explain the reason behind the policy, could the basis for the policy be weak or inappropriate? Perhaps the team member doesn’t understand why the policy exists, and therefore can’t adequately represent your organization.

I’ve recently supported an organization where the leaders have dealt with many exceptions associated with employees. Each exception seemed justified at the time it was made. The decisions were not made hastily. However, the organization is now suffering some unintended consequences that are disruptive.

Making an exception generates two groups, the “haves” and the “have nots.” When the first exception occurs, the “haves” group is simply one person. With just one person affected, the exception perhaps can be kept quiet. When no one else knows about the exception, there’s no one to become upset.

However, with the second and third exceptions--which are typically not expected when the first concession is made--the possibility of the “have nots” finding out increases significantly. The organizational problems occur when the “have nots” start offering up their cries of “Unfair!”

Please keep in mind that I’m not explicitly opposed to exceptions. Like any reasonable (and admittedly self-centered) person, I advocate an exception when the existing system poses a barrier to what I want!

What I find, however, is that exceptions are typically focused on the immediate beneficial outcomes, with little thought given to the potential negative long-term outcomes. Admittedly, you can’t predict with accuracy the lasting effects of any decision. Still, some of the potential long-term unintended consequences can be imagined (and perhaps avoided) if some “What if?” questioning is applied.

As you and your leadership team think deeply about this “exception” concept, please consider two of my prior articles: “How Important is Consistency and Predictability?” and “The Law of Unintended Consequences.” Both are on my website: <http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.html>. On the “Article Archives” page, scroll to find the articles alphabetically.

Having raised your awareness of this potential long-term disadvantage of exceptions, let’s look at the advantages. Every enhancement we’ve experienced in life has come from a break with what was once traditional and accepted. Improvement is the very act of introducing exceptions.

For example, cell phones freed us from the physical constraints of a landline. Further innovation gave us smart phones, enabling us to take photos, navigate streets, and surf the internet. Want improvement in your organization? You’ll need to allow and even encourage exploration of potential exceptions!

Here’s the bottom line. Exceptions in themselves are neither good nor bad. Before authorizing a given exception, be sure to contemplate its potential future negative effects on each of your remaining team members. Doing so will serve to protect the long-term health of your organization’s culture.