

HERMAN®



“That guy who’s filling in for you at the office is a real hard worker.”

When to Say: “They Can’t Do That!”

*“I don’t know who won it, but if we had lost
I know who would have been blamed.”*

—Gen. Joseph Joffre,

French General upon winning the Battle of the Marne



We all think we will know when it is time to go, and we’ll know it well before it happens. But many of our friends and colleagues—knowledgeable and sensitive folks all—have been surprised by a cabal of supervisors or a boss acting precipitously.

I’ve calculated I’ve worked with and for 200 city council members and 25 Mayors. As my friend Bill Morgan, former President of Colorado State University, said, “God will grant special dispensation from purgatory for such service.”

Several of those I worked with would have loved to have been able to say they “got rid of Arnold.” A few did when I moved on. But several were basically unhealthy personalities. One was particularly so. So much so, a fellow councilmember said that guy was “certifiable.” Another heard that comment

and said, “No, he’s not crazy enough to be committed; but if he was *in*, they wouldn’t let him *out*.” This was a councilmember who made a motion in council to “get another city manager”, and couldn’t get a second to his motion from the other members. Since there were fourteen other council members, it was a bit of a victory for me. But there is always someone out there with a maverick viewpoint. And there is often someone who wants to take advantage, to gain power, or maybe just indulge their ego because they “got the big guy.” (Almost anyone is in danger of being fired by someone whose ego is so weak that demonstrating the power of termination makes him feel superior. You don’t even have to be a “big guy” in order to feed that ego.)

On a couple of occasions I’ve worked for folks who seemed to need the ego stroking of power; the relationship became dysfunctional, and I’ve had to draw a line in the sand, marking a place beyond which I could not go or a place beyond which, if they went, then *I* would go.

I’ve believed strongly in service of the democratic process by helping the elected officials do their thing, whatever the light as they saw it defined their thing. And I’ve been willing to compromise if I disagreed. Within limits of morality, legality, and some modicum of good sense, I’ve done so. But elected officials and other supervisors can get messed up.

We’ve all heard of the council which demands that “two department heads be fired or you are.” Then, the manager has to choose between his or her value system and the job, or to decide between his or her success on this job or just *holding* onto the job. While that kind of thing occurs only occasionally, it’s still useful for any employee to have a game plan in mind.

The more that game plan includes defining what the employee will not tolerate, the better.

Some people would soften that approach: One said, "You have no responsibility to be thrown out the door." Action in such a situation is not universal. I just figure that if I'm an employee of any organization, I want to be treated by the hiring authority or boss on the basis of my performance, not on some personal or political whim. Every organization can be humane in the way it treats its people, and every one should be. The easiest way to ensure the organization is humane is to apply the Golden Rule in all policies dealing with people: Treat them as you would be treated.

THE FALLBACK POSITION IS A FUTURES EXERCISE

In one sense *Fallback Position* is just a personal extension of professional futures planning. As a manager or employee of whatever business or entity, you are constantly looking at trends and forecasting from them. You make inferences about the future from these trends. The activity of personal planning is similar. You, as an individual, are always looking around, trying to figure out what's going on, to avoid being behind the curve on trends. This is an informal strategic planning process, the SWOT analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

Of course, any adult looks to his or her future financial situation, to provide for the education of children, care of parents, retirement costs, and disposition of estate.

Just as you would use "what-if" scenarios in professional futures planning and personal financial planning, you will do best

to have a fallback plan for the worst-case professional scenario.

But what I'm proposing is more than that. It can make the difference between initial depression and genuine anticipation. This is not to suggest the approach is a panacea. After all, getting fired, no matter what formal, official euphemism is used, is still a shock. It's the same kind of shock to the system as being dumped when in your teens by the love of your life. Your ego is damaged. Others don't see you for the marvel that you are. Maybe some think you weren't as good as they thought (or so you perceive). There are even people who think you did something wrong, whether illegal, immoral, or just dumb. When you're fired, people talk to your spouse, your kids, and other staff. They say these things. It's all stressful.

I believe the stress is the same whether you are fired or gently nudged to move on. If the majority of the governing body has the votes to move you on before you judge it the right time, or if you work for one individual and he or she is not happy with you, you will suffer a similar level of stress.

Some have characterized the stress akin to the grief of death. Magruder called it "a little death," wherein the same stages are passed through as in the surprise death of a loved one, or in the approach of your own death: Denial, anger, acceptance, adjustment, preparation.

The period of grieving moves us through those stages. A fallback plan is really needed during the first two phases; the plan helps you get through those quickly and positively, until you are able to cope and get on with your life.

START WITH "WHO AM I?"

It's important to know who we are. We like who we are,

most of the time, and we don't spend much time thinking about it. Oh, we did when we were teen-agers and when we were in college trying to "find ourselves," but since then we've pretty well settled into something that relates to self-knowledge. It might be what the late Dr. Kenneth Boulding referred to as his "image" of knowledge, his subjective world-view that guides his actions. We all, I expect, are guided by how we perceive the world and ourselves.

Personal life planning, as part of a total, holistic approach to self-improvement, is a valuable program for defining who you are, for defining your values. Many exercises have been developed to allow us to better think about who we are and how to guide our life around that conclusion. One such is called *The Obituary*. It's simple: List the top ten things you would like to have listed in your obituary; these are the things you would like most to be remembered for.

(This is to be distinguished from the Epitaph, which is the message, the sometimes witty phrase found on tombstones. You recall W.C. Fields apocryphal epitaph: "On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia." Or "I told you I was sick." Or "Died at 97, Suffering Illness All Her Days.")

This is the Obituary, the summary of the life. Some newspapers allow loved ones to write obits for the dearly departed; those tend to get a bit lengthy and sometimes maudlin. Most papers have beginning journalists spend months writing obits because the ability to summarize a life in a few paragraphs is good training for how to cover the news concisely.

Now in thinking about the list in your Obit, you would exclude the things you would put on a resume. After all, obit time isn't the time to be qualifying for another job—it's time

to list the things that are truly important. The immortal items: real values; things you'd like your great-grandchildren to know.

So you make your own list now. The Top Ten list of *What's Most Important to Me*. Things for which you'd like to be remembered:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Did you put down the things you like to do, with your skills noted: Basketball player—and could dunk? Golfer who beats her or his handicap when playing for money? Green Bay Packer Couch Potato with an unbroken record? Duck hunter, fisherman, jogger, writer, gourmet cook?

Or did you put down some of the things on which you spend your time: Rotarian with unbroken attendance for 30 years? Member of 17 community organizations and committees that bettered the city?

Or did you list those things you gave your money to: Tithed at Church for twenty years? Supported an orphan in the Philippines? Built the University Fund by contributing annually at the Patron level? United Way supporter? Sustaining Member of the Symphony?

Now this is not to be confused with Bumper Sticker Philosophy. Of the thousands of things to be in support of, some people will select a few to espouse on their bumper stickers. I always have a problem with that. Which causes do I favor enough to list over all the others? You see an old Honda with a sticker that says, "Teach Peace" and another sticker that says "No Off-shore Oil Wells", shown by the circle/slash oil derrick symbol. Then the car has a sticker for the public education radio station. But no National Rifle Association sticker.

I saw a car once with the all-time record—27 bumper stickers. As I stood on the sidewalk counting and reading them all, the driver came out and I complimented her: Told her she got the award for the most bumper stickers—and the most complex set of values I'd ever seen. She was pumped up and pleased. (I didn't tell her the multiple values shown appeared to me to be more confused than just complex. I didn't need to start some new kind of road rage, maybe called "bumper sticker rage.")

When it comes to bumper stickers, I like the bumper sticker that cites the current cynical political philosophy: "Two Terms: One in Office. One in jail." Or the one the late columnist Herb Caen of the **San Francisco Chronicle** noted: "Horn Broke: Watch for Finger!"

The Obituary, however, is not bumper sticker philosophy.

It clearly is a value exercise. What role is most important to you? If you're like most people you'll have a list that includes Father, Husband, Son, Brother (for men, of course), Christian (or Jew or Baptist or Muslim, etc.), maybe Citizen, Friend, and then follows maybe occupation, maybe a hobby that you do well, (musician, poet, cook, golfer, or woodworker). Everyone's list is different, but most have the similarity that the occupation is a good deal farther down the list than each of us would have thought.

That's useful when you sit at a meeting and things aren't going your way. You start to feel the pressure that others might think you're not doing the job well, that you're not doing it the way you should, that someone is fussing at you, that you should be stronger, that...**they can't do that!**

It's useful in that circumstance to remember your list of what's important to you. It's your value system, not someone else's. It's what is important to you that counts, not what's important to someone else—even if it is the governing body or your individual supervisor.

And that's the essence of a fallback position.

NEXT: "WHAT AM I FOR?"

*"It's often easier to fight for one's principles
than to live up to them."*

—**Adlai Stevenson**



Add to that list another Top 10 list: What Am I For? What are the known values I hold? These are things I really believe in, are important, and that are worthy of going to battle for.

Make yourself another list:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

These are items like honesty in all things, human rights, integrity, the right to bear arms, the right to free choice, belief in my country and my government, the right of the elected official to be treated as if exalted by the election process. The knowledge that the democratic process works in the long-run, though it might be flawed when looked at from one council meeting night to the next, and it might be flawed from one election to the next or to the next several. Take comfort in the knowledge that it works in the long-run. But don't fret about one week to the next.

In the non-profit sector the things you are for might be volunteerism and community participation as the essence of community. It might be helping the less fortunate, who can't help themselves, helping to provide a social safety net. It might

be both, as support and involvement with the United Way.

In the for-profit sector it might be supporting the capitalist system. It might be the opportunity to acquire wealth. It might be supporting the Generally Accepted Accounting Practices for honesty in transactions and protecting stockholders. Avoiding Enron kinds of debacles would be surely supportive. It might be an understanding that the capitalist system is what makes the democratic process work best. That the capitalist system supports individual freedom more than anything else and is in fact essential to that freedom.

Your list of things you are for might also be like support for the community, the quality of life, the involvement of the people in things that affect them, the public's right to know, support for the citizen as an individual, a strong public education system, maybe even free education through college.

There are also things like support for the institution, loyalty to your supervisor, and helping them make the right decision in the right way. Support for the staff and not leaving them hanging out, "spinning in the wind" as the Nixon-era tapes described some staff taking the fall.

If you're a Board member or in a management position and are struggling with the new changes in ethics and board or corporate responsibilities, it might be trying to find the common ground between support and accountability. Support for the staff and accountability to the stockholders. It might be creating value for the stockholder, creating jobs for the employees, allowing the economy to expand, and ratcheting throughout society.

In any position it might also be support for the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and perhaps for social equity. Maybe it's for the American Way of Life, as you define it. And it might be sup-

port for law and good order and maybe for a private economy.

This list is for the more abstract values you hold. It may or may not have anything to do with your job. But it helps you define what is important, and in so doing to prepare yourself the ultimate fallback position.

The combination of personal desires and values is what Stephen Covey talks about in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, a topically important book. He describes one of the seven habits as the things you want to be remembered for. “Begin with the end in mind,” he says. “Think how you want to be remembered at your funeral, and then act accordingly everyday.”

CROSS-OVER LINE

*“It’s better to have a bad plan
than to have no plan at all”:*

—Charles De Gaulle



Both of the Top 10 lists you have made are mental exercises that allow you to define your fallback position. That is, you will know just how far you can fallback and just how far you will go in working with others before you will go no more. This is the Cross-Over Line: Beyond here if they go, then I go.

The ancient map-makers identified the unknown areas by writing, “Beyond Here There Be Dragons.” You need to know where that boundary line is, and it’s different for everyone. It’s individual.