

Continuum of Compromise

IAC Ethics Mini-Exercise

The Continuum of Compromise is a model frequently used in law enforcement ethics training. It addresses the perplexing question, “How do individuals of the highest integrity and ethical standards end up as criminal defendants?”

As we know, police officers are not the only ones who can fall into this trap. Today, we will look at the Continuum of Compromise and evaluate how this applies to our roles as public officials and supervisors.

Perceived Victimization

This can happen in any situation where an individual over-invests in their profession at the expense of other aspects of their lives. Over-investment causes people to link their sense of self to their role as a public official or supervisor. The reality is, many aspects of our jobs are beyond our control and we may find ourselves resenting the job we once loved because we cannot have complete control. If we haven't experienced this personally, you can be sure that this sentiment is present for some of our employees. It's important for us to know and to lead those under our supervision to an understanding that we have absolute control over our own integrity and professionalism even if much of what we do is controlled by others. I also refer to this first stop as ‘I don't like reality.’ I'm sure we have all experienced situations where someone coming into office had ideas of the sweeping changes they wanted to me or how they would get things done that met with roadblocks previously. However, we have also experienced reality. The jobs that look easy from the outside are much harder than we may have thought. We don't have the control we perhaps envisioned.

Acts of Omission

This next stop is where we individuals who feel victimized begin to rationalize and justify behaviors they would not normally engage in, such as not doing things they are responsible for doing or doing just enough to ‘get by’. From the law enforcement side, the excuse might be “You will never get into trouble for the stop you didn't make!” How this behavior is handled by supervisors and/or peers may determine whether or not a person moves up the continuum. While police officers may bond together at this level against administration, what happens in an office setting when an employee isn't doing their job? **TURMOIL!!** What happens when this happens with Elected Officials? **TURMOIL!!** We rely on each other doing our jobs, so when one person is not pulling their weight, it causes problems...but perhaps not legal problems at this point.

Acts of Commission-Administrative

At this point in the Continuum, instead of just shirking responsibilities, the public official or employee may commit administrative violations such as breaking small rules that seem inconsequential or unnecessary, engaging in prohibited pursuits, romantic interludes at work and the like. Again, these behaviors create turmoil, but often only carry a penalty of department sanctions.

Acts of Commission-Criminal

In this final stage on the continuum, individuals engage in and rationalize behavior that they previously would never have imagined. At first, the difference between administrative and criminal Acts of Commission may seem undistinguishable. But, at this level we meet two factors that potentially tip the scales toward serious legal ramifications. These two factors are Entitlement and Loyalty. Entitlement is that mindset that we somehow 'deserve' something we don't and that we have no personal accountability. Loyalty is typically a positive characteristic, but not when loyalty trumps integrity.

So this is the Continuum of Compromise. None of us wake up one day with an intent to commit an ethics breach. Like all transgressions, whether personal or in the work realm, it's the baby steps in the wrong direction that lead to a place we don't want to be. Being aware of these stops along the way is the first step in self correction and recommitment to personal integrity.