



RULES OF THE ROAD

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”

Lord Acton’s famous words, written more than 130 years ago, have proved an eloquent rebuttal to those who would promote political monarchies, oligarchies, or dictatorships. More recently, the quality of leadership and hierarchal structures at U.S. workplaces have been receiving similar rebuke.

Think the twenty drug companies on trial for price fixing, the mauling of innocent mortgage holders following the financial crisis, the repeated violations of privacy by large tech firms, the ubiquitous voice prompts that waste customers’ time, and the widespread disgrace exposed by the #MeToo movement.

The mood of a growing number of workers and the body politic is increasingly fierce. “U.S. billionaires worry about the survival of the system that made them rich,” *The Washington Post* reported in April.

CNN reported on congressional testimony in May by heiress Abigail Disney, who decried the way high CEO pay — like Disney CEO Bob Iger’s — comes at the expense of the lowest-paid workers. Change is coming. “We need to change the way we understand and practice capitalism,” Disney said.

Walmart employees have been a bellwether of what we can expect. In recent years, they have used shareholder proxies and other means to influence the rules of the game, addressing issues like the basis for executive pay and family leave policies. In March, *The New Yorker* reported Walmart staff were seeking board seats at the company. “Low-level employees are deeply invested in a company’s long-term success, because their families depend on it in ways that top executives may not,” the article noted. In March, U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin reintroduced legislation mandating worker participation on corporate boards.

In 2018 and 2019, in walkouts across the globe, Google workers literally demonstrated what the future may bring. *Fortune* highlighted the issues in May in an article titled “Inside Google’s Civil War,” noting the protesting workers are concerned that “Google is losing touch with its ‘Don’t be evil’ motto.”

So why is it that those who rule so often fail to respect the very rules they should oversee?

In 2012, *Smithsonian Magazine* reported on research suggesting that when a person’s sense of self was tied to a “moral identity,” the person tended to think of their impact on others when they attained power. Shelle Rose Charvet, author of the book *Words That Change Minds*, describes two mindsets that people use in different contexts. One views work as a ladder or a game to be won — and may break the rules or cheat to get ahead. The other mindset believes in mission and following the rules but may take failure too personally and sabotage their own upward mobility.

The answer to the conundrum lies in awareness — and structuring the rules of the game so those who truly care about their impact on others do indeed succeed in every way possible.

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