



# Don't Cut Corners

*Wayne Turk*

**T**here are many paths to upward mobility; some much more dangerous than others. Cutting corners is one of those dangerous paths. While it seems like a shortcut to success, it is definitely not.

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Cutting corners can involve any number of actions. It could mean ignoring policies, regulations, or laws. It might involve shortcutting the processes that are in place. It might be the purchase of less-expensive equipment that may or may not meet your needs in the long term. It could mean cutting quality. It might mean ignoring or taking significant risks. It could involve lying or covering up problems. It might mean failing to practice good management techniques and relying on fear to get the job done. Cutting corners is doing less than your best to achieve some end goal. None of these actions (or inaction in some cases) are a good idea.

### **Some of the Dangers**

Common sense should usually alert you to the dangers or consequences of cutting corners, but sometimes we need reminders. Here are a few of the ways you may be tempted to cut corners, as well as the consequences, but keep in mind that this list doesn't cover every situation.

#### ***Ignoring or Breaking Policies, Regulations, or Laws***

This is one path that will inevitably get you in trouble. Think about Enron. My guess is that the managers there started cutting corners to make their "numbers" and please investors. They took small actions. They didn't plan to go as far as they did, but once they started on that slippery slope, every cut corner led to another until, pretty soon, they had to keep creating false reports or they would be found out. But they were found out anyway, and it resulted in jail time for executives involved, lost jobs, a dissolved company, and huge losses for investors. That is an extreme example that affected thousands of people and millions, if not billions, of dollars.

Most of the time, the corners cut are not as big as the ones cut by the managers at Enron. They are much smaller—ignoring a safety regulation, some fudging of the numbers, ignoring or covering up broaches in policy or law (discrimination or sexual harassment, for example), fast tracking contracts in ways that are illegal or against policy, or taking action for personal gain (such as kickbacks or bribes). Some of these are usually done with the best intentions in the world. People want to be successful, and they want their organization/agency/department/project to be seen as a success. Maybe they fear failure or being fired. Maybe something is needed in the field immediately. But actions that break a policy, regulation, or law can have more serious consequences. You can lose your job and you can also face jail, lawsuits, or large fines.

#### ***Shortcutting Processes***

In the government and in the private sector, standards and processes set the structure, framework, and baseline for your work in most managerial jobs, especially project management. They ensure that things are done the same way each time. Processes keep you out of the doghouse and give your actions more chance of success through the use

of proven methodologies. Sometimes managers see processes as being bureaucratic, labor (or paperwork) intensive, and slow. So they take shortcuts.

There are two things to remember about the way processes should be structured. First, they should be flexible. Processes should provide guidance only and should not necessarily provide rules locked in concrete. Managers and their people should have the capability to bypass or modify some processes—in certain cases. That is not a license for people to do what they want when they want. The departure from a given process should be approved or acknowledged by the overall manager and coordinated with those involved.

Second, processes should be tailorable, especially for projects. People should be able to adjust processes based on certain parameters, such as the size, type, or length of the project. Tailoring can eliminate certain requirements that are not appropriate, such as lengthy, complex plans for a short, simple project. The same goes for processes in everyday work. When special circumstances arise, you have to be able to adjust the process to meet the circumstances.

What happens too often is that people—managers and workers both—bypass the processes to try to save a little time or effort. When they skip steps or ignore the process entirely, things get missed or mistakes are made. Appropriate test plans and testing are a perfect project-related example. If good processes aren't followed, it costs more time and effort to correct the errors made or the problems caused. If a process has problems or is inefficient, then change or improve it.

#### ***Wrong Personnel or Equipment***

Hiring good people and putting them in the right positions is a must. Weak employees or even good employees in the wrong jobs can cause significant problems, but sometimes managers take shortcuts there too. It is easier to let a weak employee slide than to go through the effort of making him or her better or undergo the documentation and firing process. Without good employees in the right positions, it can take much more work to get anything done, and you need more people. That lowers productivity and raises the cost of the work and the length of time to get work accomplished. Also, your good people may get tired of babysitting or doing more than their share of the work and quit. It can be the same with an employee in the wrong job.

Most of us have learned through experience that the best way to get things right every time is to have the right equipment for the job. Skimping and cutting corners will only lead to problems down the road. Unfortunately, there are situations (especially in poor economic times and tight budgets) and managers that don't allow for purchase of the best—and perhaps more expensive—equipment. "Value engineering" is a regrettable byproduct of budget constraints. But there are some situations that just don't lend themselves to value



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engineering. One of those is IT equipment. When it comes to deploying IT equipment and software, you must have the right stuff. You don't necessarily need the best, latest, or most expensive, but you do need what will get the job done in the most efficient manner. Getting a cheaper computer, for example, may not give you the speed or memory that is needed. That is frustrating to the user and costly in time and money, as the computer will probably need to be replaced faster. Also, don't just look at what you need today, but look at tomorrow, next week, and next month.

### ***Cutting Quality***

Tough economic times may make cutting costs a necessity. We've seen that in DoD and the private sector. Both government and companies are tightening their cost control measures. Many in the private sector are going out of business because they can't cut enough. Cutting quality is not a very wise way to cut costs, though. It can backfire, and it can be dangerous for our warfighters who may need specific equipment and quality items to save lives and protect themselves.

When you have to cut costs, save where they matter the most. Don't just pinch pennies for the present. Make sure your savings will pay off in the long run. Compromising on quality might cost you later on in repairs and replacements, or it might cost lives. Cutting product quality is a type of corner cutting that can be dangerous to everyone involved.

### ***Ignoring Risks***

When you cut corners, you are taking a risk. Sometimes taking risks is all well and good. The problem that frequently occurs is that people ignore the risks. If you don't identify, assess, and respond to risks, your work could go down the tube and take you with it.

You always live with the possibility that events, actions, and decisions may cause adverse effects in your world as a manager. Common sense says that cutting corners will increase the risks that something will go wrong, some problem will surface, or something will be missed. You can't ignore the risks. There are going to be consequences for every decision that you make or action that you take, and

some of them are going to be bad. You can't get around that. The more risks that you take, the higher probability that those consequences will be negative. That's what frequently happens when cutting corners.

### ***Lying or Covering Up Problems***

Always be ethical, accountable, and trustworthy. Lying or covering up problems will lead to additional problems for you, the project, and everyone concerned. Just remember that lies will eventually be found out, and the results are almost always bad.

### ***Bad Management Techniques***

Many times, when a manager starts to cut corners, good management techniques go out the door. Managers quit sharing information, don't spend enough time with their people, don't treat their people as individuals, don't provide good paperwork on their people, and so on. The manager becomes so focused on what he is doing that he forgets or ignores what he has learned.

The idea of cutting corners usually comes up when there is some kind of time or financial crunch, and the shortcut looks like a possible solution to whatever problem is currently at the top of the list. It also comes up during times of increased stress levels. Managers tend to become grouchy and short tempered. They resort to techniques such as "do it because I said so," or they try to manage by fear and ridicule. It doesn't work—at least not for long.

### ***Final Thoughts***

Cutting corners just doesn't work in the long run. If you make cutting corners a habit, you won't be prepared to do the right thing when it is necessary. You will always be looking for the easy way out. Inevitably, you will come up short, and the corners you cut will have to get bigger and bigger. You begin to rationalize your actions. It could even get to the point where sabotaging competitors or co-workers will become necessary.

You might rationalize that everybody does it. Success accomplished in wrong ways, however, can breed arrogance, and that arrogance can make you feel that the rules no longer apply or you won't get caught. Don't fall into that mindset because eventually you will be caught. Just remember:

- Don't cut corners
- Don't look for the easy way out
- Do the right thing, even if it the hardest thing to do
- Don't bend your ethics for the illusion of success.

These guidelines also apply to your life outside of work, as they'll help make you a better person.

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