

The Accidental Compliance Professional Lesson 12. The Dangers of Rationalization

Writer and philosopher Ayn Rand once said, “Rationalization is a process not of perceiving reality, but of attempting to make reality fit one’s emotions.”^[1]

Psychoanalyst Karen Horney once said, “Rationalization may be defined as self-deception by reasoning.”^[2]

Someone in compliance once told me, “If you find yourself trying to explain something after you did it—that’s rationalization.”

I say, “Rationalization is at the root of many bad decisions.”

Rationalization is a disease that infects good decision-making. It helps wrongdoing persist. It convinces otherwise ethical people to do or ignore unethical things. Here’s a prime example. I posted something on social media about an organization that in the eyes of many people did not adequately address a known problem. It involved child abuse. One employee witnessed a particularly terrible crime. Yet the organization did very little about the problem. The perp continued abusing children and suffered little-to-no consequences until society found out about the abuse many years later. Then all heck broke loose. The organization suffered greatly in terms of bad PR. The perp went to jail, but numerous victims were left to deal with the effects of his abuse for the rest of their lives. Many people who did nothing except help cover up the problem lost their jobs, and their reputations and careers suffered. My post was critical of the organization’s handling of what I considered to be a terrible crime and a wildly inadequate response by leadership.

Then an ethicist from that organization posted a comment. It said that I had not studied the facts and there was some question about who knew what when. *I was dumbfounded*. I had studied quite a bit, but that was irrelevant. The organization had an eyewitness to a terrible crime and did little to nothing. I couldn’t believe what I was reading—an ethicist rationalizing? This individual was pretty well respected in the ethics community . . . a leader really. If an ethics leader can rationalize an incident like this, we are all doomed—unless we work with compliance professionals who are trained to spot and stop rationalization. It’s a big part of why the profession was created. Too many people, like this ethicist, rationalized doing too little in response to serious issues.

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