Getting away with as much as possible by doing as little as possible

A reflection on incentives, self-interest, and the small compromises people make when they think no one is looking.



Last week*, the Volkswagen (VW) affair reminded us once again of the flaws we all have in our character. What happened at VW happens all over the place. We're just not always aware of it.

We all have great ideals and good intentions. But whenever money gets in the way, people tend to make different choices. We are all given incentives to save money or to make money, and it seems hard to stay true to our ideals and intentions when convenience, gain, reward start pulling us in another direction.

Sometimes that shows up in major scandals. Sometimes it shows up in very ordinary choices.

And then there are the smaller examples: using the business phone or laptop for private purposes, claiming a lunch with a friend as a business expense, or taking office supplies home.

These are all examples of how money influences behaviour. Our choices are often shaped by our needs and by our proximity to what is available. We look for the edge of what is socially acceptable, or at least the edge of what we think we can get away with.

When it comes to money, we always seem to want more of it. Yet money itself is rarely the real need. More often, it is the lifestyle, comfort, freedom, or recognition we associate with it.

"Money is never the real need; it is the lifestyle we are after."

And it is not always cash people are after. Someone with access to office supplies may take home a pen, a notebook, or printer paper. Someone with access to a company phone may use it privately whenever possible. We exchange access for benefit.

I am aware these are generalisations, and there are always exceptions. But the point remains: people are often looking for some personal advantage. More value for less effort. Something extra without paying the full price for it. The name of the game becomes: how do we get away with as much as possible by doing as little as possible?



As people rise higher in an organisation, they usually do not settle for a pen, a notebook, or private phone use. The scale changes. The stakes change. The rationalisations become more sophisticated.

We saw this in banking. Instead of focusing on products that truly served customers and respected the spirit of the system, people designed products that exploited loopholes for short-term gain. We know where that led.



And what we saw with Volkswagen and the banks is not unique. Similar things happen in other industries, institutions, and governments. Often we simply do not know about it yet. Or we do not care until the consequences become impossible to ignore.

If we want to manage a company, a team, a family, a school, or a society in a way that is sustainable in the long term, we must become aware of the consequences of our choices, both now and later. We must be willing to look at ourselves in the mirror and ask whether we are adding value, acting truthfully, and making choices that serve more than just ourselves.

Temptations are many. Justifications are easy. But integrity is a choice.

Choose wisely. It will serve you in the long run.

Be Rawsome!

* This is a rewrite of an article I posted on Linkedin in September 2015 after the VW dieselgate. The last two images are created with AI.