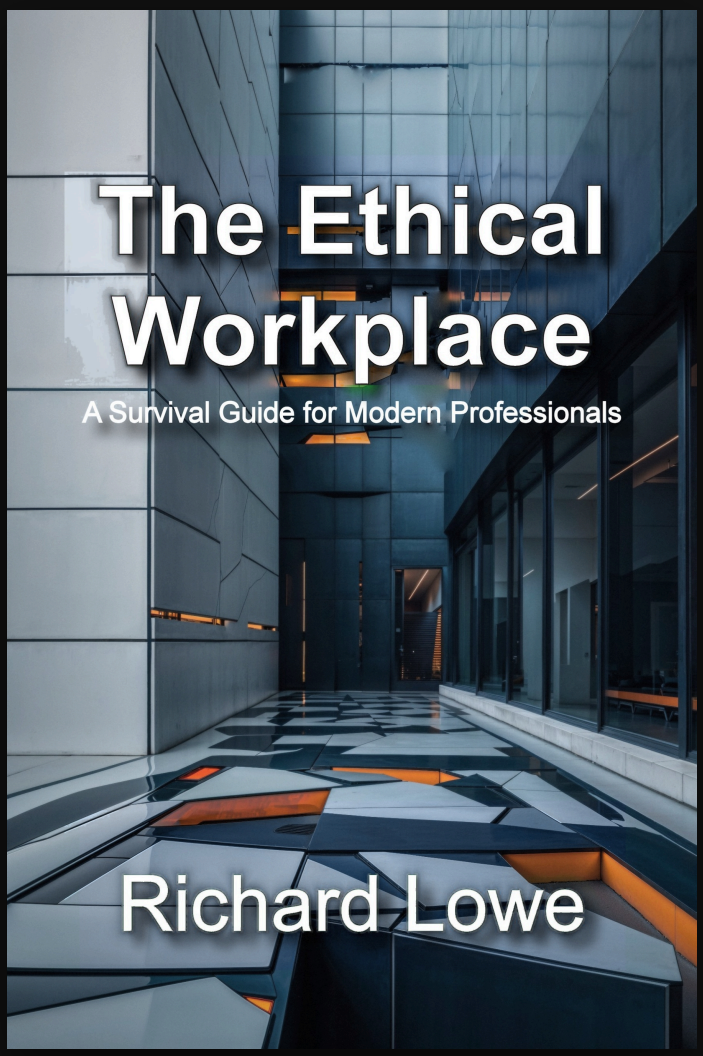
A FREE COMPANION TO THE ETHICAL WORKPLACE

The Gray Area Field Guide

Four questions, six checklists and a few hard truths for the ethical calls nobody trained you to make.



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How to Use This Guide

Most ethical decisions at work are choices between different goods. This guide helps you spot the ones that matter.

The Ethical Workplace argues that honesty, fairness and respect haven't changed, even though the situations have: remote work, AI tools, monitoring software, expense reports for a home office. This guide turns the book's ideas into something you can use at your desk.

1. **The four-question filter**, for any decision that feels off.
2. **The gray area self-audit**, for the small choices nobody is watching.
3. **The problem behavior log**, for when a colleague crosses the line.
4. **When the boss isn't ethical**, the patterns and how to protect yourself.
5. **Score your workplace**, using the book's three-part test.
6. **Your lines**, written down before anyone tests them.

> *Ethical workplaces require three things: clarity about values and expectations, systems that reward ethical behavior and punish unethical behavior, and leaders who model the standards they expect from others.*

Part 1: The Four-Question Filter

No rulebook covers every situation. Run any decision that feels off through these four questions.

1. **Does this hurt someone?** Count the people who aren't in the room: the client, the colleague whose idea it was, the team that has to plan around your estimate.
2. **Is this fair?** Would you accept it if you were on the other end?
3. **Would I want everyone to act this way?** If every person on the team rounded up their hours or stretched the expense policy, what would the place look like?
4. **Am I being honest?** With others, and with yourself about why you want to do it.

The book's reminder: legal is the floor, the minimum that keeps you out of serious trouble. Ethical is the standard that makes people want to work with you. You can be completely legal and still be the person everyone avoids.

Run one through

THE DECISION			
WHO COULD IT HURT?			
FAIR FROM THEIR SIDE?		**EVERYONE DOES IT?**	
AM I BEING HONEST?			

Part 2: The Gray Area Self-Audit

Integrity is the accumulation of hundreds of small choices that nobody is monitoring.

Check every statement that is true for you today. Be honest. Nobody else is going to read this page.

Time and availability

- ☐ When I'm shown as "available," I'm working
- ☐ I log time off for personal appointments during work hours
- ☐ My reported hours match my actual hours, with no rounding up
- ☐ I don't pretend my connection dropped to escape a meeting

Money and resources

- ☐ Every expense I claim is clearly business, and I ask when it's blurry
- ☐ The company card buys only company things
- ☐ Company software and equipment don't run my side business
- ☐ My side work doesn't touch my employer's customers, ideas or competitive position

Credit and authorship

- ☐ I disclose AI assistance when it did real work on something I present
- ☐ I name the people whose ideas I'm presenting
- ☐ I disclose when I hired outside help on my assignment
- ☐ As a contractor, what I learn at one client stays with that client

Estimates and commitments

- ☐ I give ranges when I'm guessing ("three to five days") instead of false precision
- ☐ I raise a slipping deadline early, while there's still time to adjust
- ☐ I say no, or offer a smaller scope or a later date, instead of overcommitting
- ☐ I keep confidences and keep my word

14 to 16
Your reputation is working for you. People notice, even when you think they don't.

10 to 13
Look at the boxes you left empty. Small compromises compound.

9 or fewer
Pick one empty box and fix it this week. Each lapse makes the next one easier.

Digital records last. Email metadata, version histories and access logs can surface a shortcut months or years later.

Part 3: The Problem Behavior Log

Normal workplace friction is the loud chewer. Problem behavior makes people dread coming to work.

Signs it has crossed the line

- [ ] **Gaslighting:** denying things they clearly said or did, or insisting you're too sensitive
- [ ] **Credit theft:** presenting your ideas as theirs, or quietly shrinking your role in a success
- [ ] **Manipulation:** volunteering you for work, then acting as if it was a favor
- [ ] **Bullying:** public humiliation, exclusion from communications, setting someone up to fail
- [ ] **Your own signals:** second-guessing every interaction, walking on eggshells, watching others avoid them

The log

Keep detailed records with dates, times, witnesses and examples. They counter gaslighting and give you something concrete if you escalate.

DATE / TIME	WHAT HAPPENED	WITNESSES	EFFECT ON ME OR THE TEAM

Protect yourself

- [ ] Limit contact to necessary work communication, and keep it professional and in writing
- [ ] Avoid being alone with the person
- [ ] Don't share personal information that could be used against you
- [ ] Find out whether your HR department fixes problems or only manages liability
- [ ] If others are affected, compare notes carefully. Several voices describing one pattern are harder to dismiss
- [ ] Escalate immediately for discrimination, harassment or anything illegal
- [ ] If you leave over it, state the facts in your exit interview

Part 4: When the Boss Isn't Ethical

The core problem is the power imbalance. Your boss controls your assignments, evaluations and future.

PATTERN	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
Credit thief	Presents your work as their own to senior leadership; the hero of every story about the team
Micromanager	Demands constant updates, gives no clear direction, unavailable when you need guidance
Favoritism	Rewards loyalty over competence; an inner circle gets the best work and information
Scapegoat	Disappears when things go wrong and holds everyone accountable except themselves

Tactics to watch for

- ☐ **Loyalty tests:** a small questionable request, a shared confidence, or a fishing question about other leaders
- ☐ **The complicity trap:** harmless requests that escalate until you feel equally responsible
- ☐ **Information control:** filtering what you hear and limiting your access to senior leadership
- ☐ **Impossible standards:** contradictory expectations and criticism of decisions they approved
- ☐ **Isolation:** damaging your relationships, excluding you from meetings, blocking training

What to do

1. **Build other sources of information.** Relationships with peers in other departments.
2. **Make your work visible** to people outside your reporting line, so your reputation doesn't rest on your boss's account of it.
3. **Document** anything that could affect your references.
4. **Hold your boundaries without open confrontation.** Be creative about how you answer a problematic request, and don't join in.
5. **Plan your departure** if it's unsalvageable. Leaving too fast can hurt your finances. Staying too long hurts your health and reputation. You can't fix an unethical boss, and you're not obligated to sacrifice your career trying.

My protection plan

PEERS IN OTHER DEPARTMENTS I CAN TALK TO	
WHO SEES MY WORK OUTSIDE MY REPORTING LINE	

Part 5: Score Your Workplace

Good people make bad choices inside toxic systems. Bad people can be constrained by good ones.

Rate each statement from 1 (never true) to 5 (always true).

STATEMENT	SCORE
CLARITY	
I know what's expected of me ethically, beyond the code of conduct	
Leaders talk honestly about trade-offs and explain how decisions get made	
SYSTEMS	
Targets can be met without cutting corners	
People who raise problems are protected from retaliation	
Bad behavior gets corrected early, whoever does it	
Rewards fit the effort, and nobody is set against their coworkers to earn one	
LEADERS	
Leaders follow the rules they set for everyone else	
Bringing bad news to a manager is safe and predictable	
Total (8 to 40)	

32 to 40
A workplace worth protecting. Help keep it that way.

20 to 31
Find the low scores. That's where problems will grow.

8 to 19
Read the red flags below closely, and look at your options.

Company red flags

- ☐ The business model makes money by harming the people it serves
- ☐ Corner-cutting is normal, and refusing marks you as naive or uncommitted
- ☐ Sustainability or diversity statements that contradict what the company does
- ☐ Leaders who “had no idea” about problems everyone below them could see

Part 6: Your Lines

You don't have to save the world. Don't make things worse, and when you can, make them a little better.

People who don't know your limits will keep pushing until they find them. Write yours now, while nobody is pressuring you.

I WILL ALWAYS	I WILL NEVER

Your responsibility checklist

- [ ] I'm honest in my communications and give credit where it's due
- [ ] I keep my commitments, and I treat colleagues fairly whether or not they're useful to me
- [ ] When I witness harm, I at least document it, support the person affected and refuse to take part
- [ ] I know which colleagues share my values, and we back each other up
- [ ] I ask about culture and how problems get handled before I take a job
- [ ] I'm building savings and portable skills, so I can afford to say no
- [ ] I take care of my health, because exhausted people make worse decisions

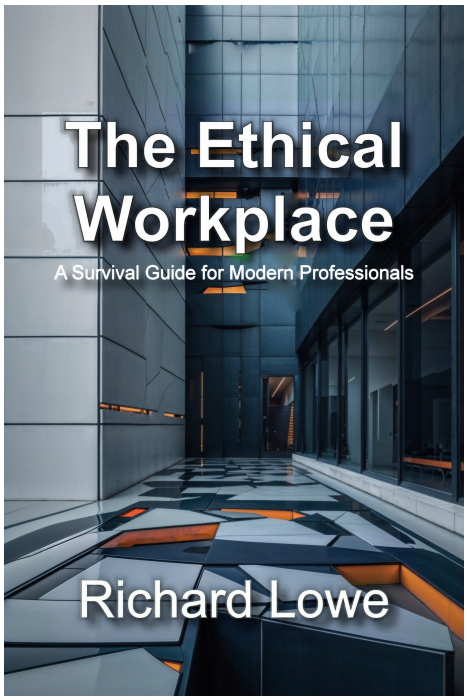
If you manage people

- [ ] I correct bad behavior the first time, when it's easiest
- [ ] My rewards fit the effort, and I skip contests that set people against each other
- [ ] My team knows exactly how I'll react when they bring me bad news
- [ ] I don't use “I didn't know” or “I had no choice” as excuses

> *Your responsibility is to decide what kind of person you want to be professionally and then live consistently with that decision, even when it's inconvenient. Everything else is just details.*

The Whole Story

This guide gives you the tools. The Ethical Workplace gives you the reasons behind them, from building trust on remote teams and using AI honestly to working for an unethical boss, plus what Enron, Theranos, Wells Fargo and others reveal about how good people end up doing bad things.



The Ethical Workplace:
A Survival Guide for Modern Professionals
The Working Life

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