



## Double Standards Destroy Companies:

Leadership in the Face of Popularity and Politics

### Von Christian Rook

Usually, when I'm brought in to restructure a company, I start by observing how people interact.

Who talks to whom? Who is acknowledged – and who is not? Who eats lunch together? How are cleaning staff treated? What happens in moments of conflict? Is curiosity shown toward guests, or are they avoided?

All of these seemingly small moments are windows into the company's true culture – the informal networks, the hidden power centers, and the unspoken rules.

One of the clearest signals I look for is how **safety** is treated. In too many companies, **safety** is a mere **political slogan**: important as long as it doesn't interfere with productivity or delivery targets.

At one company, this culture revealed itself quickly. I was hired to turn around operations, and I soon saw that the organization was living with two sets of standards.

On one side were the "**untouchables**" – people who had been with the company for **a long time**, were **well liked**, **politically connected** to management, and **specialists** in their field. They were **protected**. On the other side was everyone else.

### An Incident

One day, one of the „untouchables“, a maintenance team leader, was cleaning an assembly machine using compressed air – a task that required climbing into a tight space.

According to the safety protocol, **protective goggles were mandatory**. But they were uncomfortable in the narrow confines of the machine. So he skipped them. A piece of plastic hit him in the eye with high speed. An ambulance was called, and he was taken to the hospital.



Fortunately, he didn't lose his eyesight. No surgery was needed, but he **would be out for several weeks** to recover.

A few days later, with an eyepatch and visible embarrassment, he came to a meeting I had called.

We talked about the incident. He **admitted** his mistake, **took full responsibility**, and **assured** me – with real conviction – **that it would never happen again**.

I told him I believed him. But there still had to be **consequences**.

Together, we agreed that a **written warning** was the appropriate disciplinary action.

Not as a punishment, but as an accountability measure.

He had knowingly violated a safety procedure, gotten injured, and become unavailable for a long period – all of which impacted the team and the company.



We documented the warning and filed it, as required, with the **works council**.

That's when the storm hit.

## The Politics of Protection

The head of the works council burst into my office, furious. He demanded that I **withdraw the warning**.

His argument: this team leader had been with the company for years. He was one of the best. There had never been complaints against him. How could I possibly reprimand *him*?

I calmly explained what had happened – and how the conversation with the employee had gone.

I reminded him: I would hold *everyone* to the same standards.

If someone knowingly breaks safety rules, gets injured, and causes operational disruption, a written warning is the consequence. Full stop.

The works council leader was not convinced. He told me this was **not how things were done at this company**. If we treated everyone the same, he warned, **“we will lose all the good people.”**

I pushed back. I asked: should the police ignore speeding if the driver is generally a “good guy”? He rolled his eyes. **“That’s completely different,” he said. “You’re going to destroy this company.”**

Later, I learned the two **were close personal friends**. The real issue wasn’t fairness – it was **favoritism**. For years, informal friendships had translated into **informal protections**.

So I asked another question:

*“Would it be okay if a priest gave the most brilliant sermons and led the community with inspiration – but molested children in the back of the church?”*

He looked at me, stunned. The metaphor landed.

## The Turning Point

I told him something else I deeply believe:

**Good people don’t leave because of standards and fairness. They leave when no one enforces them.**

They leave when **others get away with breaking the rules, slacking off, or mistreating coworkers**.

They leave **when leaders look the other way**.

The best people – the ones who bring pride, quality, and integrity – **want a culture of accountability**.

They thrive on **honest feedback**. They don’t fear consequences. They **trust that leadership will apply the same rules to everyone**.

In Germany, disciplinary measures like written warnings follow a “three strikes” system for the same violation. No one gets fired for a single mistake. But when accountability is absent altogether, the real damage begins.

## The Bottom Line

As a leader, you shape culture not with posters on the wall, but with the decisions you make when it's uncomfortable – when the person in question is popular, talented, or politically protected.

Fairness is not the enemy of loyalty. It’s the foundation of trust.

And trust, once established, is the only sustainable base for real performance.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Christian Rook".

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