

## The benefits of being neutral

Written by Julie Desmond  
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When General Mills recently announced its company's stance against the ban on same sex marriage, the uproar could be heard from both sides of this highly charged issue: there were both cheers and jeers. High profile organizations take such a stand only after relentlessly considering the not only issue but also the consequences of choosing a side. Strong leadership sometimes requires making tough, even divisive, decisions sometimes. And sometimes, strong leadership requires not taking a position at all. Neutral is a choice, too. The key is in knowing when to step back, and how to maintain that neutral position under scrutiny.

Know when to hold back. Business leaders, managers, boards, investors and employees all can benefit from knowing when to stay neutral. Staying neutral does not mean you as a leader do not hold an opinion. It means you have made a conscious decision to keep your opinion to yourself for the benefit of others. A news organization might stay neutral on an issue, for example, in order to remain credible when reporting fairly on both sides of an issue. A scientist might choose to stay neutral in order to conduct unbiased research. Likewise, a manager might stay neutral in order to help his staff develop or find a solution independently.

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When managers refuse to dive into the fray, they demonstrate trust and confidence in the ability of their team to work through their problems. Without a mandate from the boss, employees can voice opinions, explore creative alternatives and outline processes without limiting the list of potential solutions.

Neutrality is a skill that develops with practice. Remaining noncommittal can be a challenge, especially when one or both sides of an argument are looking to their leader for support. Even trickier is dealing with the underlying feeling a manager might have that they know what the right answer is.

Practice neutrality on small, day to day, low-consequence concerns. Where to keep the copy paper, what color the new carpet should be, when to distribute that flyer... these are decisions that someone other than the leader can usually manage without bringing down the organization.

Stay strong by keeping a physical distance between yourself and the decision maker during discussions on minor matters. Ask someone to get back to you with a final verdict.

Stay reward-neutral. Avoid even a pat on the back when decision makers lean your way.

Keep your eye on the prize. When pressed to take sides, remember your decision has already been made. Neutral is a choice.

When it makes sense, stand tall and let others know you have decided to stay out of this battle. There will be other issues, and you will be just as firm when taking a side is the right thing to do, but on this one, you're an observer.

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