

Just Following Orders: An Unreliable Justification
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We are taught via textbooks, seminars, and casual conversations that leaders tell followers what to do, and followers do as they are told (i.e., leaders lead and followers follow). Some followers adhere to the advice that informs when leaders say jump, the follower asks how high. Although many followers have been rewarded for simply asking how high, some have been punished for following their leader's orders. Attempting to justify actions by simply saying you were following the orders given by your leader will not always avert disciplinary actions.

Leaders expect to have power over their followers and are accustomed to having their orders carried out—sometimes without question. However, some leaders fail to realize the importance of garnering follower trust in an effort to earn the respect necessary to make followers feel comfortable with unquestionably following orders. Many leaders instill and rely on fear to activate their followers and many of those followers have been punished for carrying out the orders of their leaders out of fear. One of the most noted leader-follower relationships where fear influences followers' decisions to follow orders occurs in the military. Lower-ranked service members often blindly follow the orders of their superiors.

There have been several military trials where followers were punished for following the orders of their leaders. Widely known trials where many of the indicted followers were sentenced to death were named the Nuremberg Trials. The followers (defendants) in those trials attempted to justify their actions by saying they were following orders. The defense became known as the Nuremberg Defense. Although the defense lessened punishment for some of the defendants, the Nuremberg Defense was not enough to escape punishment.

An Army Lieutenant, who claimed he was just following orders when he directed the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War, was charged with murdering over 100 Vietnamese civilians. The Lieutenant, after being released from confinement, showed remorse for his actions and admitted he was foolish for following the orders of his Commander. The Lieutenant's Commander was never held liable for any role in the massacre. The Lieutenant might not have been aware that soldiers were required to disobey unlawful commands.

Civilians have also been punished for following the unlawful orders of their superiors. Many fear that disobeying an order might result in

harm to their professional career. While it is true that disobedience is a form of misconduct and may be viewed as a breach of contract that can justify dismissal, followers should be mindful of the ramifications of following orders that violate laws. An employee is not obligated to obey unreasonable or unlawful orders. If the employer insists that the employee carry out an order that is unreasonable or unlawful, the employer's action can be viewed as a breach of contract, and the employee might be awarded some legal remedy. Laws, such as the Whistleblower Protection Act, offer employees protection from reprisal if they report misconduct that includes an abuse of power or a violation of a law, rule, or regulation.

One civilian used the Whistleblower Protection Act to gain a remedy after being punished for disobeying an order. The civilian was removed from a leadership position and given a low performance evaluation score because he refused to obey an order he felt violated a law. In a recent ruling, a three-judge panel at the Merit Systems Protection Board ordered the civilian's leaders to return him to his prior leadership position, revise the civilian's performance appraisal score to an appropriate level, and pay the civilian back pay.

Teachers at a public high school in Seattle, Washington, refused to administer a standardized test that their leaders ordered them to give to their students. The teachers were informed that the results of the tests would be used to gauge the competence of the teachers. The teachers argued that using test scores to measure a teacher's effectiveness is unfair and refused to follow their leader's order. The teachers' actions show that there is strength in unity and that employees do not have to follow unethical orders.

Followers are expected to carry out the orders of leaders. Failure to follow orders can lead to disciplinary action—including dismissal. However, followers should understand they do not have to follow unreasonable or unlawful orders and have access to protections emplaced to assist employees who feel they are being forced to follow unethical orders. Followers who use those protections to challenge unlawful orders facilitate positive leadership changes that result in a more ethical, trustworthy, and respectful working environment where employees feel comfortable following the orders of their leaders.