

# Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

## A STORY ABOUT INTEGRITY



The proposal lies on my desk like a neatly printed promise. Three pages, clearly structured, a cover page with a photo of the client's location bathed in warm evening light. This is what documents meant to inspire hope look like.

"Extension of framework agreement – 2026 to 2028," it says at the top. Double-digit million-euro revenue, guaranteed capacity utilization, a signal to the market. In a week, I could be sitting in the advisory board and saying: We saved the year.

And below that, in a paragraph that seems to have slipped in by chance: "Special conditions for billing via subsidiary Müller & Söhne GmbH to optimize personnel costs."

I read the sentence three times, even though I understood it the first time. Formally, it's not a crime. It's a loophole. A trick. One of those gray areas where you can convince yourself you're just being "pragmatic." And that's precisely what makes it dangerous.

The sales manager sent the document last night, with a comment that's still stuck in my head: "Kathi, this is the only chance. We have to be flexible."

Flexible. The word is nice, as long as it doesn't mean "flexible to the point of self-denial".

I get up and go to the window. The parking lot is almost empty; it's a work-from-home day. The city feels muffled. My chest, however, isn't muffled, it's constricted.

For weeks, our leadership team has been discussing values. We've redefined them, held workshops, and launched internal communication. "Reliability," "Respect," "Purpose and Responsibility." Big words, nicely presented on posters.

Now the first real test is on my desk. Not a workshop, not a set of moderation cards. A real, expensive, risky test.

My phone vibrates. It's the sales manager.

"Kathi, did you see it?" His voice is controlled, expectant. He knows it's a delicate situation. He also knows that I'm the last hurdle.

"Yes," I say. "I saw it."

"Okay. So we're in agreement then? If we don't do it, he'll go to the competition. It's not really illegal."

Not really illegal. I can feel my shoulders tensing. That's the kind of sentence that gets quoted in newspapers later when something goes wrong.

"I want to talk to you about this," I say. "Please come to my office at ten."

"Okay," he says, and I hear a faint click in the tone – as if he were already hoping for the right direction.

I jot down notes up to ten. Not about the numbers. I know those. I write down questions. Because integrity is rarely a question of "can you do it" – but of "will you do it".

When he arrives, he has that quick, practiced smile on his face that people have when they sense good sales and at the same time feel a risk.

"So," he says, as he sits down. "The customer is ready to sign. Just this special condition..."

I place the paper between us. "Explain the mechanism to me again."

He explains. Calmly, matter-of-factly. The way you explain something that's technically legal. Under this model, costs would be routed through a subsidiary and assessed differently according to the tariff. On paper, it's "optimization." In reality, it's circumventing a standard that we strictly adhere to for all other customers.

"And what is the price?" I ask.

He raises his eyebrows. "Price? There isn't one. We benefit, he benefits. It's a win-win."

I pause for a moment of silence. He's right—within his own framework. But integrity doesn't arise within the confines of sales. Integrity arises where one pushes the boundaries further than is comfortable.

"The price is our credibility," I finally say.

He looks at me as if I've switched to a foreign language. "Why? Nobody can see that."

I take a deep breath. "If we do this, we'll be setting a precedent. From tomorrow onwards, we won't have a clear boundary anymore, but rather negotiable values. And eventually, someone will see it."

At the very latest, our employees. At the very latest, another customer. At the very latest, an auditor.

He waves it off. "Kathi, that's just theory. We're talking about a few percent. Not fraud."

I notice an old part of me beginning to briefly explain: the market situation, the jobs, the responsibility for revenue. I could easily get lost in argumentative fog here and tangle myself.

Instead, I hear the coach, who has been a silent companion on board for months, say: "Integrity is what you do when no one applauds." She had said it with a half-smile, as if it were an aside. I know now: It wasn't a side note. It was a litmus test.

I look at him calmly. "This isn't about percentages. This is about identity. Just last week in the leadership circle, we were discussing how rules must apply to everyone to maintain trust. If we bend them now because it suits us, the whole values project becomes worthless."

He falls silent. Not convinced, more hurt. I can see the pressure he's under. He needs the deal. And he doesn't want to be the one who loses it. I know that feeling. It's tough.

"And if he leaves?" he asked more quietly. "Then we'll have a hole here that we can't fill."

I nod slowly. "The risk is real. But a customer who only stays if we bend our standards for them is not a stable customer. They are a dependency."

He looks at the paper, then back at me. "What should I tell him?"

"The truth," I say. "That we want the extension. That we're prepared to adjust conditions within our rules. But not to go down a special path that would harm us." I lean forward. "And I'll come into the meeting with you. You're not going in there alone."

He sighs. A deep sigh, a mixture of anger, fear, and perhaps even a touch of relief. "You know he doesn't want to hear that."

"I know. And I also know that he respects clarity when he feels it."

He stands up, gathers the paper as if it had suddenly become heavier. He stops at the door.

"Kathi," he says, without looking at me. "Sometimes I wonder if we can afford such principles in this day and age."

I feel that sentence inside me. It's honest. And that's precisely why I have to stay honest.

"I think we can't afford to lose her."

After he left, I sat for a moment. I noticed my heart was still racing. Integrity rarely feels like a victory. More like a muscle that grows stronger from being used against resistance.

In the afternoon, I'm on a client call, sitting next to the sales manager. The client is friendly, but cool when we reject the special offer. Things get uncomfortable. There's pressure. A pause, during which I think: Now we're going to lose him.

And then he says, slowly: "I understand. I respect that. You are the first to be so clear."

He wants a renegotiation within the regular legal framework. We'll go through it step by step.

No loophole.

No tricks.

When the call ends, I lean back. The sales manager looks at me. Not enthusiastically. But calmer.

"Okay," he says. "Then that's how it is."

I nod. "Then that's how it is."

Integrity is not a moral glorification. It is the decision to remain a company that can be trusted — even when it is expensive.



# Takeaway inspiration

## Integrity

Integrity is demonstrated where a "small" compromise brings short-term advantages but undermines your credibility in the long run. Leadership means maintaining boundaries even when it becomes costly—and earning trust precisely through this.

When faced with the next gray area, ask yourself: "Would I do the same if it were publicly known tomorrow?" If the answer is no, you've reached your limit — and that's precisely where integrity begins.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT INTEGRITY FOR YOU

1. Where am I currently facing a "small" border shift?
2. What would be the price of my credibility if I gave in?
3. How can I say no and still maintain a relationship?



Feel free to contact me anytime::

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