



By Jeff “Chief” Urbaniak
COLUMNIST

DEAR CHIEF: Almost everyone at work takes stuff home. It’s normally little things like pens, sticky notes, note pads, or sometimes even a ream of paper. I don’t take anything home but I feel like I’m being pressured to do so. Every quarter we’re hounded about conserving supplies and to order exactly what we need and no more. I want to say something to management about this but don’t want to be considered a snitch. What do you recommend I do?

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY



DEAR LOOKING THE OTHER WAY: Many people have a tendency to put a pen in their pocket at work and take it out of their pocket at home. They repeat this until they have a drawer full of pens with the corporate logo on them.

When people do this, they need to ask themselves: Is it a perk or is it theft? It’s a perk if the owner or powers to be make it known that work or office resources can be used elsewhere (while traveling or at home even). It’s theft if it is not addressed or not permitted.

I’ve seen people get fired for taking home copies of corporate software

Perk or theft--know the difference

programs and installing them on their home computers. In fact, there were six people involved in this particular incident. One person, though, was spared (not fired) because she didn’t take the software home. On another occasion, a worker was ordered to pay back their company \$728 for unauthorized use of company phones (calling grandma long distance!).

Quite often when workers take things home for personal use, they will encourage as many others as possible to do the same thing. Why? Because stealing in numbers is considered to be a safety net in the event light is shed on the criminal behavior. It is a common belief that company leadership can’t afford to fire several people at once and will typically ignore what’s going on or simply tell everyone to “just stop now” and there will be no disciplinary action. But hey, you never really know; a lot depends on leadership styles, values, or tolerance.

So before you start filling your pockets or purses, make sure it’s worth it. Are those pens really that attractive? If for some reason you lose your job over this, will you be able to sell enough cheap file folders to feed your family for however long it takes you to find a new job?

If coworkers are bugging you about smuggling office supplies home, tell them (and keep telling them) you don’t do it. Eventually they’ll stop encouraging you to join them in their efforts.

Good judgment, along with awareness of company perks, is important in knowing whether you’re acting appropriately or not. After all, some companies, for marketing purposes, actually do want employees to take little things home or to use items with company logos on them anywhere they can.

Lastly, you don’t have to willingly reveal what you know about others’ behavior unless you feel obligated or morally compelled to or are caught up in some kind of official investigation (you may need to protect yourself and other innocent people). Be sure, though, that you don’t falsely accuse anyone and make your statements on the matter anonymously if possible.



For an opportunity to have your question, issue or concern addressed in the Dear Chief column, go to www.DearChiefAdvice.com and submit your comments or email them to Jeff@DearChiefAdvice.com.