

Essay by Brett Bockmon

Shortcuts in Hustle Culture: Using A Form of the Rotary Four-Way Test to Evaluate Its Justification

In today's high school culture, productivity is worn like a badge of honor. Between AP classes, varsity sports, leadership roles, part-time jobs, and the constant pressure to build the perfect college resume, students are immersed in hustle culture. Everyone prides themselves on how to look busy. We compare how late we stayed up, how many activities we're juggling, and how packed our schedules are, as if exhaustion is proof of success. In this environment, shortcuts can begin to feel less like moral compromises and more like survival tactics. But when does "efficiency" cross the line into cutting corners? If skipping a few chapters of reading saves an hour of sleep, or dividing up an assignment makes it easier to manage, it can seem harmless. But thinking about the question, "Is it ever justifiable to cut corners?" I realize that not all shortcuts are equal. So, how does one figure out where the line is?

In considering this question, I'm reminded of the Rotary Four-Way Test that I recently learned about in class. The Rotary Four-Way Test is a series of questions - Is it truthful? Is it fair? Does it create goodwill? Is it beneficial to all? — to guide ethical decision-making. I think this same concept can be applied in developing my own kind of personal litmus test when trying to answer the question about taking shortcuts. I can ask myself: Is it honest? Is it fair? Does it harm anyone? Would I feel proud if this choice were made public? In considering those questions, I've come to believe that shortcuts are only justifiable when they are forms of honest prioritization rather than unfair advantage. Once they compromise fairness or trust, they may offer short-term success or rewards, but ultimately character and credibility are weakened.

Some choices that look like shortcuts are actually responsible prioritizing. When I decided to quit the soccer team my junior year to focus on earning the starting varsity baseball catcher position, it might have seemed like I was reducing my commitment to make things easier. In reality, that decision required maturity and self-awareness and it strengthened my commitment to pursuing excellence in one area rather than dividing my focus. Trying to do both would have stretched me thin and likely hurt my performance in each. Through my litmus test, that decision felt honest and fair. I wasn't misleading anyone or gaining something I hadn't worked for. I simply chose where to invest my time. The same reasoning applies to course selection. While some students stack their schedules with as many AP classes as possible to boost GPA and class rank, I've chosen classes that genuinely interest me, even if they might not maximize my ranking. That decision may not look as impressive on paper, but it aligns with my goals and doesn't harm anyone else. In these cases, what looks like a shortcut is really an intentional focus and choice.

However, the line becomes less clear in collaborative situations. In high school, efficiency often means working together—splitting research, dividing slides in a presentation, or sharing study guides before a big test. When everyone contributes equally, this kind of collaboration passes my litmus test. It's honest, fair, and mutually beneficial. But the gray area appears and the line is blurred when not everyone pulls their weight and individual contributions become uneven. There have been times in group projects where someone does less work yet receives the same grade. Even if the teacher never notices, something still feels off. If I wouldn't feel comfortable explaining honestly exactly how much I contributed, then I already know it doesn't fully pass the fairness test.

This is where shortcuts can become a slippery slope. Accepting a slightly unequal contribution can make it easier to justify doing even less next time. Dividing work evenly can slowly turn into letting others carry the load. When you excuse small imbalances, it's human nature to excuse the bigger ones. And once fairness is compromised, it becomes easier to rationalize more serious forms of misrepresentation such as copying homework, cheating on a test, or plagiarizing parts of an essay. What begins as "working smarter" or "dividing and conquering" can gradually build resentment and erode trust and credibility.

When shortcuts cross into outright dishonesty, they clearly fail every part of my litmus test. Cheating on an exam, inflating leadership roles on a college application, exaggerating volunteer hours, or bending rules in sports by using ineligible players might create immediate advantages; but they aren't honest, they certainly aren't fair to others competing on the same field, and in actuality, are really forms of fraud. More importantly, these behaviors create a constant risk of exposure and being outted! My mom always says, "Any job worth doing is worth doing right the first time, because it's much harder and more costly to do it over." That advice reminds me that shortcuts don't eliminate effort; they just postpone consequences. Rebuilding trust after being caught lying or cheating is far more difficult than just doing the work the right way from the beginning.

At the end of the day, cutting corners might deliver short-term wins — a higher grade or a better class ranking. But those victories often come with a hidden cost: the anxiety of being exposed and the knowledge that the achievement isn't entirely earned. Doing things the right way may take more time and effort, but it builds something shortcuts never can — confidence, credibility, and genuine pride in your accomplishments. In a culture obsessed with hustle and comparison - as my mom also says: "keeping up with the Jones" - the real test isn't how much we accomplish or how many achievements we accumulate. It's whether we can succeed without sacrificing our integrity. The students who resist cutting corners may not always win the race or wind up in first

place, but they are far more likely to earn rewards and develop the character that lasts and leads to long-term success!