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New Supervisor Policies

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Description

Chief engineer of Axtell's Installation Division, Howard Hanson implements a new policy which may be necessary. A situation arises for two engineers which makes them question how necessary the policy is.

Abstract

This case is one of thirty-two cases which address a wide range of ethical issues that can arise in engineering practice provided by the Center For the Study of Ethics in Society, Western Michigan University.

Body

Axtell, Inc. designs, manufactures, and installs large containers designed to store highly active chemicals. These containers require strong, reliable safety seals to prevent spills and leakage, precision temperature control units, and an automated valve system to control inflow and outflow. For several years Axtell only manufactured the containers. Its major customers installed them without supervision from Axtell. However, recent automated design innovations require intricate installation procedures. Mistakes can be very costly, ranging from damaged

machinery and interrupted workflow to serious injury to workers. So, Axtell now sends engineers to each site to supervise installation.

As chief engineer of Axtell's Installation Division, Howard Hanson manages the installation supervisors. He is proud of his division's record during his five years on the job. There have been only two reported incidents of serious accidents involving Axtell containers. Both were determined to have resulted from negligence on the part of chemical companies rather than any flaws in the containers. Axtell's good record is in no small way attributable to the work of Howard's division. Although the supervisory work is tedious, Howard insists that his engineers carefully supervise each phase of the installation. There are times when the workload is so heavy that it is difficult for the engineers to meet installation deadlines; and occasionally customers apply pressure on Axtell to be allowed to install containers without Axtell supervision. But, Howard realizes that quality, and perhaps even safety, may be compromised without proper supervision. Furthermore, he is concerned to minimize Axtell's legal liabilities. So, he has a motto on his office wall: "Better late than sorry!"

Normally only one Axtell engineer is sent to an installation site. But because the installations require several complex procedures, Howard has the work of new engineers double-checked by veteran engineers for the first month on the job. The veteran supervisor's job is to coach and monitor the newcomer's supervision as they oversee the installation together. Each container is given a dated inspection number that can be traced to the engineer. Those that are double-checked are given two numbers, one traceable to the new engineer, the other to the veteran engineer. Axtell's requirement that new engineers have a one month training period was Howard's idea. Although he realized that it was not required by law, Howard convinced Axtell management that having such a requirement would enhance quality and safety.

Scenario #1

Tom Banks was in the last week of his one month trial period. He had been working with veteran engineer Charles Yost during the entire trial period. It was clear to Charles from the very first week that Tom had a real knack for thorough, efficient supervision. It seemed apparent to both of them by the end of the third week that Tom was more than ready to "go it alone." But, they reminded themselves that

"rules are rules;" the training period is a full month. So they would have to stick it out for the full trial period. At the beginning of the final week Tom noticed that Charles seemed somewhat lethargic and inattentive. When he asked Charles if he was all right, Charles replied, "I'm just a little tired. I've been under a lot of pressure lately, and it's been cutting into my sleep." Tom suggested that Charles take a couple of days of sick leave to get rested. "We can ask Howard to assign someone else to me for these last couple of days." Charles replied that he had exhausted his sick and vacation leave time for the year and that he was too financially strapped to lose any pay. "Besides," he said, "Howard doesn't have anyone available to replace me this week, and this job can't wait. These guys are already champing at the bit."

By Friday Charles was too ill to concentrate on his work. Tom suggested that Charles go home for the day. But Charles replied, "I thought about staying home today, but I just can't afford it--and we have to get the job done this week anyway. I'll get some rest this weekend, and I'll be fine next week. We can get through today all right. Look, next week you're on your own anyway. I've been checking your work for three weeks. You're the best supervisor I've ever seen around here. Don't worry, you can handle it. Give 'em a good look and I'll just put my tag on." What should Tom do?

1. Cover for Charles and carry out the supervision by himself.
2. Stop the inspections and tell Charles that they need to talk to Howard.
3. Other.

Scenario #2

[Following Scenario #1, choice 1).]

Tom Banks covers for Charles. The scene shifts to several months later. Nearly a year has passed since Tom Banks came to work for Axtell. Tom has been doing very well and is now being considered for Charles Yost's position. Tom had been concerned about Charles's health for some time. Still, it came as a shock to him when Charles died from a massive heart attack just two weeks ago. Unfortunately, only ten days after Charles' funeral, Axtell received a complaint from Cameron Chemical charging that several of Axtell's containers have serious leakage problems. Three workers have been hospitalized because of exposure to the leaking chemicals, and several pieces of valuable equipment have been seriously damaged. Cameron plans to sue Axtell for supplying defective equipment. Axtell's attorneys, on the

other hand, plan to argue that the fault must lie elsewhere (Cameron's storage facility, improper handling of the containers, or perhaps even sabotage). They plan to cite Axtell's excellent record and its rigorous installation supervision.

Howard is sent to Cameron to inspect the leaking containers. He finds two inspection numbers on each of the three containers. He is able to trace the first number on each container to Tom Banks, whom he regards as one of his best young supervisors. He traces the second number to Charles Yost. Although, obviously, he cannot talk with Charles Yost, Howard decides he should talk with Tom Banks. As they talk, they determine that the installation of the containers was completed on the last day of Tom's trial period. Suddenly Tom remembers that Charles had not been feeling well near the end of that week. Tom remembers thinking about asking Howard if he could replace Charles with another supervisor, but he agreed with Charles that he was more than ready to "go it alone." Besides, he felt that going to Howard would only cause problems for Charles, not to speak of causing problems with an anxious customer. So, he decided to double-check everything himself. So far, Tom is recalling this only to himself. What should he say to Howard?

1. He should say nothing to Howard about departing from the regular routine.
2. He should tell Howard about departing from the regular routine.
3. Other.

Option 1. [Scenario #2]

Tom tells Howard nothing about the departure from the regular routine. Tom is then asked by Howard to testify in court that standard procedures were followed. What should Tom do now?

1. Agree to testify, but still tell nothing to Howard about the departure from the regular routine.
2. Tell Howard about the departure from the regular routine, and let him decide what should be done next.
3. Other.

Option 2. [Scenario #2]

Version I

Tom tells Howard about departing from the regular routine. Howard says, "That's not what I want to hear. I want you to testify in behalf of Axtell. But keep this stuff to yourself!" What should Tom do now?

1. Tom should do what Howard says.
2. Tom should agree to testify, but refuse to lie in court.
3. Tom should refuse to testify unless called by the opposing side. If he is called, he should refuse to lie.
4. Tom should talk with Axtell's attorneys, telling them what he has told Howard, as well as Howard's response.
5. Other.

Version II

Tom tells Howard about the departure from the regular routine. Howard then reports this to Axtell's attorneys. They tell Howard to keep quiet about this and not to volunteer information about who supervised the installations. They hope that the Cameron will not ask Tom to appear in court; but if they do, the attorneys will "coach" Tom. Discuss.

Scenario #3

[Following Scenario #1, choice 2.] Tom calls Howard about Charles' inability to work on Friday. Howard has no one to send to replace Charles for the day. But he has already assured Cameron that the installation will be completed on Friday. What should Howard do?

1. Tell Tom to complete the work, as Charles suggested.
2. Stop the installation until a replacement for Charles can be found.
3. Other.

[If 1. is selected, think through what the likely outcomes might be. Earlier scenarios might be helpful--adding now that Howard is "in the know" from the beginning. What should Tom be prepared to tell the attorneys and the court if asked to testify? What should Howard tell the attorneys and the courts? If 2. is selected, trace out some consequences--e.g., Cameron loses \$25,000 because of the delay. Axtell offers to compensate Cameron for that amount.]

Scenario #4

[Following Scenario #1, choice 1 & 2, and Scenario #2] Tom clearly has violated the standards set by Howard. What, if anything, should Howard do about this? Does it matter how Howard learns of this violation? (E.g., suppose Tom told Howard when he and Howard first discussed the problem at Cameron. Suppose Howard learns of this only after asking Tom to appear in court. Suppose Howard learns of this through one of Tom's co-workers.)

Notes

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