



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Hospitality from a Vendor

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Description

Paul Ledbetter decides to accept hospitality from a vendor in the form of a country club membership.

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

I

Paul Ledbetter is employed at Bluestone Ltd. as a manufacturing engineer. He regularly meets with vendors who offer to supply Bluestone with needed services and parts. Paul discovers that one of the vendors, Duncan Mackey, like Paul, is an avid golfer. They begin comparing notes about their favorite golf courses. Paul says

he's always wanted to play at the Cherry Orchard Country Club; but since it is a private club, he's never had the opportunity. Duncan says he's been a member there for several years and that he's sure he can arrange a guest visit for Paul. Should Paul accept the invitation? Discuss.

II

Paul accepts the invitation. He, Duncan, and two other members have a very competitive, but friendly, 18 hole match. Paul is teamed up with one of the other members, Harvey. Although Paul does not normally bet money in matches, Duncan and the others persuade him to play for \$3.00 a hole ("Just to keep things interesting"), along with the losers buying drinks for the winners. Paul and his partner win 5 holes to their opponents 2, thus winning \$9.00 each. While they are having drinks Duncan says, "I think it's only fair that Bob and I get a rematch. What do you say, Paul? You can be Harvey's guest on Guest Day next month." Should Paul accept the invitation? Discuss.

III

Paul accepts the invitation. The match is closer this time, but Paul and Harvey win \$3.00 each. Soon Duncan and Harvey nominate Paul for membership at Cherry Orchard. The membership committee approves, and Paul is invited to join the country club. Paul accepts, thus beginning a long golfing relationship with Duncan.

Gradually Paul overcomes his resistance to betting on the golf course, and the stakes eventually grow somewhat larger. Although Duncan occasionally bests Paul, the upper hand is clearly Paul's. In the subsequent years Paul does not keep close track of his overall winnings, but he realizes that, all told, he has won several hundred dollars from Duncan. Meanwhile, Duncan is still one of the vendors with whom Paul interacts. Does this pose any ethical problems? Discuss.

IV

Bluestone's vice-president of manufacturing calls a special meeting for engineers in her division who deal with vendors. She announces: "I've been told by the president that we have to make some cutbacks in the vending area. We're going to be in real trouble if we don't get more cost effective. So, I want each of you to do a review--your targeted cutback is 20% If your unit deals with 10 vendors now, cut it back to 8, and so on. Give me your recommendations--with a brief rationale by the first of next week."

Paul next discusses the problem with the 2 other engineers in his unit who deal with vendors. They have to recommend the elimination of 2 vendors. Should Paul bring up his golfing relationship with Duncan? Discuss.

V

Paul mentions his golfing relationship with Duncan. He raises the question of whether this compromises his objectivity. The other engineers reassure him, pointing out that they, too, have formed friendships with some of the vendors and that each of them will just have to do the best they can at objectively assessing the situation. As the discussion continues, it becomes more and more worrisome to Paul that, if he were to be objective about it, he would have to recommend Duncan's elimination. Should he tell the others that this is what he is thinking, or should he let them take the initiative? [This way, either they would recommend two others for elimination--thus sparing Duncan--or perhaps both would recommend Duncan and it would not be necessary for Paul to recommend against his friend.] Discuss.

VI

Paul lets the other two engineers take the initiative. They both recommend that Duncan be eliminated. Paul says nothing in opposition to their recommendation. The group decides to think about it overnight and make its final recommendation the next day.

Paul and Duncan are scheduled for a golf match later that same afternoon. Since Paul and Duncan are good friends, Paul decides he should tell Duncan about the bad news he is likely to receive soon. Duncan is understandably upset. He points out that

he has done his best for Bluestone all these years, and he has always been pleased with what he thought was a good working relationship--especially with Paul. Finally, he asks Paul what he said to the other engineers. What should Paul say? Discuss.

VII

Paul tells Duncan that he did not oppose the recommendations of the other two engineers. He reminds Duncan that he had to try to be objective about this: "We all talked about how hard it is to deal with this since friendships are involved. But we agreed that our basic obligation has to be to do what is best for Bluestone. Friendship should not be allowed to overturn good business. So, hard as it was, when I tried to be objective about it, I couldn't really disagree with their recommendations."

As Paul painfully explains his position, Duncan's face reddens. Finally Duncan furiously explodes, "I don't believe this! What kind of friend are you, anyway? Didn't I get you into Cherry Orchard? And how good a golfer do you think you are, anyway? How do you think you've won all that money from me over the years? You don't really think you're that much better at golf than I am do you?"

Discuss the ethical issues that you now think this case raises. Would you now like to reconsider any of your earlier answers?

Notes

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