



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Company Interests and Employee Involvement in Community

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Year

1992

Description

Elizabeth Dorsey is an engineer at CDC, Inc. and is caught in a difficult situation when CDC plans are in opposition to a community group which she is a part of.

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

Elizabeth Dorsey is an engineer at CDC, Inc., a large corporation in a crowded metropolitan area. Elizabeth prefers living in a smaller community. So she commutes 30 miles daily from her home in Parkville, a community of fewer than

5,000 people.

Noted for her environmental concerns, Elizabeth is on Parkville's Committee for Environmental Quality, a small but active citizen's group. Last year the committee successfully spearheaded opposition to rezoning a Parkville recreational and wildlife area for commercial purposes. While acknowledging that commercial development would aid the local economy, the committee convinced the City Council that economic progress should not come at the expense of the environment.

However, now Elizabeth is facing a difficult problem. She has learned that CDC has its eyes on the recreational and wildlife area for developing a new facility. What do you think she should do? Explain.



CDC, Inc., a large corporation in a crowded metropolitan area, needs to expand its operations. This will require a new facility. But the immediate area has little to offer. In surveying surrounding areas CDC's planning committee has determined that the most desirable location for its new facility would be in nearby Parkville's recreational and wildlife area. The planning committee is now authorized by CDC to approach Parkville's City Council.

CDC makes what it considers to be a very generous offer to the City Council. Presenting itself as an environmentally conscious corporation, CDC says it will need only 25% of the wildlife and recreational area; it will carefully monitor and control emissions into the air and water, using "beyond the state of the art" equipment and standards; it will annually contribute funds for the preservation and maintenance of the remaining 75% of the wildlife and recreational area. In addition, CDC points out how its presence will increase the tax base of Parkville, create new jobs, and enhance the local economy.

A member of CDC's planning committee learns that one of CDC's engineers, Elizabeth Dorsey, lives in Parkville. He suggests to committee chair, Jim Bartlett, that someone talk to her to see if she might be able to "soften up" Parkville City Council members. Jim thinks this is a good idea and calls David Jensen, chief engineer of Elizabeth's unit. "David," Jim says, "I'd like you to talk with one of your engineers, Elizabeth Dorsey, about our efforts to secure some land near Parkville." Jim goes on

to detail CDC's plans and what he would like Elizabeth to be asked to do. How should David respond to Jim's request? Assuming he agrees to talk with Elizabeth, what should he say?

Consider these questions under two different circumstances:

1. David is not aware of Elizabeth's environmental concerns or her role on the Parkville Environmental Quality Committee.
2. David is aware of Elizabeth's environmental concerns and her role on the Parkville Environmental Quality Committee.

II

[Following II. 1.]

Shortly after his conversation with Jim Bartlett, David Jensen calls Elizabeth Dorsey into his office and relays to her Jim's message. Unaware of Elizabeth's participation on Parkville's Committee for Environmental Quality, David asks, "Is there anyone on the City Council you know well enough to talk to about this?"

How should Elizabeth respond to David's question?

1. Reply that she does not know anyone well enough to talk about this matter--hoping that this will end the matter with David.
2. Tell David about her previous involvement with the City Council and her environmental stance concerning the wildlife and recreational area.
3. Other.

IV

[Following III. 1.]

David encourages Elizabeth to work on making contact with someone on the City Council, either directly or through friends who know members on the Council. What should Elizabeth say in response to David's request? What should she subsequently do?

V

David Jensen reports back to Jim Bartlett that he is not sure that Elizabeth Dorsey will be much help. "She said she doesn't know any Council members well enough to talk to them," David says.

Much to his surprise, Jim replies, "Guess what I learned just half an hour ago? I had a phone conversation with an old friend who moved away from Parkville last fall. He says Elizabeth Dorsey is on an environmental concerns committee in Parkville. She knows City Council members all right--she and her committee members took on the Council last year and blocked the Council's effort to open up commercially the area we want! We're going to have to keep an eye on her. Tell her she'd better "cool it" on this one."

What should David Jensen say to Elizabeth Dorsey?

VI

[Following III. 2.]

Elizabeth Dorsey tells David Jensen about her activities with Parkville's Committee for Environmental Quality. She says that she cannot support CDC's effort to obtain a portion of the wildlife and recreational area.

"Well," David replies, "Jim won't like hearing about this. What am I supposed to tell him?"

"Why tell him anything?" Elizabeth asks. "Just say I won't be able to help."

"And if he asks why?" "If he asks why, just tell him I'm not friendly with anyone on the Council. So I don't see how I can help to CDC on this. That's true enough," laughed Elizabeth.

How should David respond to Elizabeth's suggestion?

VII

David Jensen follows Elizabeth Dorsey's suggestion and reports back to Jim Bartlett that Elizabeth doesn't see how she can help CDC. Jim replies, "I can see why she says that. I've just learned from an old friend who lived in Parkville until last fall that Elizabeth Dorsey is on a citizen's committee that's adamantly opposed to commercial develop of the piece of land we want. The only help she's likely to give us is keeping her mouth shut on this. Tell her she should 'cool it'."

Should David relay this message to Elizabeth?

1. David should tell her what Jim said, but he need not add that he agrees with Jim.
2. David should tell her what Jim said, and he should add that he agrees with Jim.
3. David should simply drop the matter.

VIII

[Following VII. 1. and 2.]

It is clear to Elizabeth Dorsey that if she joins hands with her fellow committee members and opposes CDC's plans for developing a new facility in Parkville, this will not be well received at CDC. Meanwhile, no one else on the Committee for Environmental Quality is aware of CDC's plans. Should Elizabeth report CDC's intentions to the committee? [Should she regard CDC's intentions as confidential, or can she take CDC's request that she try to gain access to City Council members as an indication that talking about CDC's intentions would not be a breach of confidentiality?]

IX

Over the next two weeks Elizabeth Dorsey keeps CDC's plans to herself. Then she receives a phone message indicating that the Committee for Environmental Quality is having an urgent meeting. At the outset of the meeting the committee chair announces that he has just learned of CDC's intentions. "We have to act quickly to mobilize against this," he concludes.

Should Elizabeth volunteer that she already knew about CDC's intentions? If she is asked, as an employee of CDC, whether she knew anything about this, what should she say? Should she now join with her fellow committee members in mobilizing against CDC's intentions?

X

[Following VII.]

One month after his conversation with David Jensen, Jim Bartlett is shown a copy of the Parkville Weekly Press in which Elizabeth Dorsey is quoted at a City Council meeting as speaking out against any commercial development of the wildlife and recreational area. She does not mention CDC specifically, but the implication of her remark is apparent. Jim then calls David Jensen and says, "What's going on here, David? I thought you were going to tell her to 'cool it'."

How should David reply to Jim?

XI

You are a member of Parkville's Committee for Environmental Quality. Discuss what, from an ethical point of view, you think it would be appropriate for fellow member Elizabeth Dorsey to do in the above circumstances.

XII

You are a citizen of Parkville. Discuss what, from an ethical point of view, you think it would be appropriate for Elizabeth Dorsey to do in the above circumstances.

Notes

Originally titled: "Parkville."

Prepared with David Zacker.

Case study originally published in *Teaching Engineering Ethics: A Case Study Approach*, by Michael Pritchard. Center for the Study of Ethics in Society, Western Michigan University, 1992.

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Publisher

Online Ethics Center

Authoring Institution

Center for the Study of Ethics in Society at Western Michigan University