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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Question of Delegating Responsibilities

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Description

Dan Dorset had been looking forward to this trip for weeks. Once he was assigned to help Rancott install its equipment for Boulding, Inc., he arranged his vacation at a nearby ski resort. The installation would be completed on the 12th, and his vacation would begin on the 13th. Unfortunately, not all of Rancott's equipment arrived on time.

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

Dan Dorset had been looking forward to this trip for weeks. Once he was assigned to help Rancott install its equipment for Boulding, Inc., he arranged his vacation at a

nearby ski resort. The installation would be completed on the 12th, and his vacation would begin on the 13th--a full week of skiing with three of his old college buddies.

Unfortunately, not all of Rancott's equipment arrived on time. Eight of the ten identical units were installed by mid-morning on the 12th. Even if the remaining two units had arrived that morning, it would have taken another full day to install them. However, Dan was informed that it might take as long as two more days for the units to arrive.

"Terrific," Dan sighed, "there goes my vacation--and all the money I put down for the condo."

"No problem," replied Boulding engineer, Jerry Taft. Jerry had worked side-by-side with Dan as each of the first eight units was installed. "I can handle this for you. We did the first eight together. It's silly for you to have to hang around and blow your vacation." Jerry knew why Rancott had sent Dan to supervise the installation of his firm's new equipment. Rancott's equipment had to be properly installed in order to avoid risking serious injuries to those who use the equipment. For years Rancott trusted its clients to follow the carefully stated directions for installation. But several recent accidents were directly traceable to failure to follow proper installation procedures. It was now Rancott's policy to send one of its engineers to supervise all installations. Dan was confident that Jerry was as fully capable as he to supervise the installation of the remaining two units. What should Dan do?

1. Decline Jerry's offer and stay until the job is complete.
2. Call Rancott's home office and ask if it is alright to let Jerry take care of the last two units.
3. Accept Jerry's offer, and leave for his vacation.
4. Other.



[Following I. 1.]

Tempting as it is to leave early, Dan decides to stay until the job is completed. He loses all but the last two days of his vacation, but he feels he has done the right thing. Some time later Dan and his unit's chief of engineering, Ed Addison, are

having a drink after work. Eventually the conversation turns to Dan's vacation.

Dan: What would you have done if you found out I left before all the units were installed?

Ed: Honestly? Probably nothing. It sounds like Jerry Taft had everything under control.

Dan: So if I had called, you would have told me it was okay to leave before the job was completed?

Ed: I didn't say that. I don't think it would be wise for me to officially approve something like that. Then it would be my neck, too, if anything went wrong.

Dan: Meaning it would have been on my neck if anything had gone wrong?

Ed: Sure. My only point is that I probably wouldn't have done anything about your leaving early--unless something went wrong. That's a chance you would have been taking. But it sounds like it wouldn't have been a very big risk.

Dan: Would you have taken it?

Ed: That depends on how badly I wanted to ski. Actually, I never have cared for skiing--it's too risky.

What do you think of Ed's position on this matter? If Dan had known Ed's position when he was at Boulding, would it have been all right for Dan to leave early?



[Following I. 2.]

When Dan calls his home office, he talks with his chief engineer, Ed Addison. Ed tells him that he is very sorry, but he cannot officially approve Dan's leaving before the job is completed.

Dan: So you can't officially approve. What happens if I leave early anyway?

Ed: You'd better not tell me about it. I gave you your assignment. The rest is up to you.

Dan: But what if you never found out?

Ed: Look, I don't like hypotheticals. The bottom line is satisfied customers and keeping Rancott out of trouble. So, I sent you to Boulding to make sure the installations are done correctly. I've done my part. The rest is your job.

Dan: Are you telling me not to leave before all the units are installed?

Ed: I'm telling you to make sure the units are installed properly.

Dan has no doubt that Jerry is now quite capable of handling the remaining two installations. In fact, he believes that Rancott has been engaged in "overkill" by having Rancott engineers oversee all installations. All anyone has to do is follow the very clearly stated instructions--a task that is easily manageable by engineers like Jerry. Furthermore, Rancott is not required by law or contract to supervise installations. Given this, and given what Ed has said, would it be all right for Dan to leave for his vacation?

1. Yes, as long as he is quite certain that Jerry will do the job right.
2. No, he does not have official approval by Rancott.
3. Other. Explain your choice.

IV

[Following I. 3.]

Dan decides to leave for his vacation. However, he tells Jerry that he will stop at Boulding on the way back for a final check. Although he won't be able to check all points of the installation (since this would require some dismantling of the units), he can give the units a general check-over. "When I return," Dan says, "we can sign the papers, and everything will be set." "Sign the papers?" Jerry asks. "Yes," Dan replies, "the papers verifying that I've supervised the installations." Does Dan's signing of the papers raise any ethical questions? How about Jerry's signing them?

V

Suppose the reason Dan wants to leave before the installations is that he will be late for his next assignment if he does not leave early. A late start on the next assignment will result in failure to meet the contractual deadline of a major customer who is very insistent on having the work completed on time. If Dan's phone conversation with Ed is essentially the same as in III above, should Dan leave early?

1. Yes, Dan should leave early.
2. No, Dan should not leave early without Ed's official approval.
3. Other. Explain your choice.

VI

Although the probability of things going wrong if Dan leaves early is quite low, the improbable can happen. If he does leave early and something does go wrong, what evaluation of Dan's decision should be made? If nothing ever goes wrong, would you make a different evaluation? [That is, does the appropriateness or inappropriateness of Dan's decision depend on the actual outcome of his decision or the possible outcomes of his decision?]

Notes

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