

Ted Lockhart's Commentary on "Question of Delegating Responsibilities"

Commentary On
Question of Delegating Responsibilities

I

It is certainly tempting for Dan to convince himself that his staying on the job and missing out on his vacation would be unduly cautious and pointless. After all, at this point Dan has worked with Jerry on the installation procedures, and Jerry should be able to manage the last 2 installations if he is at all competent. Dan should certainly let his employer know before he leaves the project early to begin his vacation, since his colleagues in the Rancott home office can reasonably expect him to stay on the job unless they are informed otherwise. The more difficult issue is whether he should leave early even if he is given approval to do so by his home office.

One argument in favor of Dan's leaving before the last 2 installations are completed is that the risks of things going wrong as a result of his doing so are quite low. They are already low because the installation directions are clearly stated and no accidents should occur if they are conscientiously adhered to. They are especially low because he would be leaving the last two installations in the hands of a presumably competent engineer who at this point has significant experience in the installation procedures. However, there is still the fact that accidents have occurred in the past. Moreover, even though Jerry has been through the installation procedure eight times, he is much less experienced than Dan and may not be aware of the kinds of things that can go wrong or cause problems. This is especially true if the installation is complicated and susceptible to unforeseeable problems.

Although Dan's desire to begin his vacation on schedule may be very important to him, it is difficult to see how this is relevant to the ethical questions arising in

relation to his decision. If Rancott's policy of having its engineers supervise all installations is sound, then it is hard to see why Dan's vacation plans should be weighed against the application of that policy in this particular instance. Perhaps it will be argued that Jerry's experience in assisting in the installation of the first eight units is enough to allow Dan to suspend the policy under these particular circumstances, but as noted above Jerry's experience in the installation procedure is still meager in comparison with Dan's.

Dan's overriding concern as an engineer should be for the safety of those who will use the equipment. His vacation plans are secondary. Unless he is firmly convinced that Rancott's policy regarding installation of the equipment are needlessly cautious and restrictive, he should remain on the job until it is completed.



Ed's main concern seems to be his "neck" and what would happen to it if anything went wrong. He is willing for Dan to leave before the equipment installation is completed as long as Dan gets all the blame if negative consequences ensue. Either Ed does not believe in Rancott's policy, which he is presumably supposed to enforce, or he is willing to see it violated as long as he suffers none of the ill effects. If he disagrees with the policy, then he should attempt to have it repealed. If he agrees with the policy, then he should do his job, which is to enforce the policy. In either event, his self-serving attitude about Dan's actions is deplorable.

Dan's obligations are not affected by Ed's position on this matter. Whether he could have "passed the buck" to Ed if things had gone wrong has little if any ethical significance. Again, Dan should stay on the job until it is completed.



As in the previous scenario, whether Ed gives official or unofficial approval to Dan to begin his vacation before the job is finished and whether Dan will be held responsible by others if things go wrong is not ethically significant. As a member of the engineering profession, Dan should assume responsibility for his actions and make decisions on the basis of his ethical obligations to the general public, his

employer, and his clients. Even if he is firmly convinced that Jerry is capable of finishing the installations without Dan's presence, there is still the small chance that errors will occur if he is not there to catch them. Furthermore, there is some extra insurance in having two engineers cooperating and checking each other's work. Even if both engineers are competent, there is always the chance that momentary inattention will result in accidents if there is no backup support. Perhaps duplication of effort is inefficient, but if the stakes are high it may provide an added margin of safety that should not be declined.

IV

Dan's signing the papers certainly does raise ethical questions. For example, what is the purpose of having papers signed verifying supervision of the installations? Is it a mere formality that no one pays any attention to? Or is it intended to be an integral part of the implementation of Rancott's policy regarding supervision of equipment installation? The greater likelihood is that signing the papers is intended to be a check preventing violation of the policy which relies upon the honesty and integrity of those assigned to carry out the supervision. For Dan to sign the papers without actually completing the supervision defeats the purpose of the policy, which, if the policy is sound, cannot be justified. Moreover, even if the policy is excessively restrictive and should be abandoned, signing a statement that one knows to be false is dishonest and therefore unethical unless there are overriding reasons for doing so. No such reasons are evident in this case. Similar arguments apply to Jerry's signing the papers.

V

In this scenario, Rancott must choose between carrying out its policy regarding supervision of equipment installation or fulfilling its contractual commitment to the second customer. It seems unlikely that Dan would be the one who would decide which is the more important, and it would certainly be appropriate for him to consult with Ed and others at Rancott on this matter.

Clearly there would be a stronger argument for Dan's leaving the completion of the equipment installation at Boulding to Jerry in order to go on to the next job than if his motives were to begin his vacation on schedule, since it can certainly be argued

that contractual commitments generate ethical obligations. Unfortunately, Ed again seems to be preoccupied with his "neck" and what happens to it and not with ethical considerations. Consequently, his input is of little help to Dan. Perhaps Dan can consult with others at Rancott who will be more forthcoming in their suggestions. Otherwise, Dan must decide which obligation is more stringent--reducing the risks to the users of the Rancott equipment at Boulding or fulfilling the terms of the contract to the second client. The conflicting ethical considerations are preventing harm vs. promise-keeping. It is difficult to judge which is the more significant without additional details. However, in general, it would seem that the former is normally the more important consideration.