Michael Davis' Commentary on "US Parts"

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John Budinski, quality control engineer, has both an employer, Clarke Engineering, and (through his employer) a client, USAWAY. USAWAY has specified that products manufactured for it be made in the United States. Clarke contracted to provide USAWAY with a product "made to specs." Budinski has now discovered a quality control problem. Two bolts were not made in the USA. The problem may be only "cosmetic." The bolts are as safe, reliable, and durable as their American counterparts. Indeed, the problem may not even be cosmetic. The bolts are not visible from the outside of the product and even someone opening the product for repair would have to look carefully to determine where a bolt was made. Still, the two bolts do not meet specifications and part of the job of quality control is to make sure products meet specifications. What should Budinski do?

He should certainly not keep quiet. His job is to report quality problems when he finds them. He has found a problem. Deciding what to do about the problem will require consulting others, not just "his superiors," but all those responsible for producing the product or dealing with USAWAY. Cosmetic flaws are a common quality problem. They are, I believe, seldom resolved by trying to slip the product past a customer. Instead, they are usually resolved by getting the customer to waive a specification (perhaps in return for a small reduction in price).

That may not be possible for USAWAY. They may have made their reputation by selling only "All-American" products. If so, the quality problem is not merely cosmetic. The product might fail in a way that could seriously damage USAWAY's reputation. It could fail to be "All-American." The only alternative, then, is to replace the bolts now, whatever the delay and whatever the expense to Clarke, or to try to get out of the contract.

While I doubt any quality control engineer would seriously consider passing the bolts on his own authority, the plant manager might. Plant managers tend to focus too much on "getting the product out the door" and too little on the long-term effect of what they do. Timely delivery is usually important when one company considers buying from another. So is price. But just as important is quality, not necessarily quality in any absolute sense, but quality in the sense of meeting specifications. Most companies are willing to pay a bit more and to put up with some delays if the only alternative is receiving a product they may or may not be able to use. Companies without a reputation for quality are usually pushed to the margins of the market (as are companies that can't deliver on time). Clarke Engineering's reputation for quality is an important asset, one a plant manager can easily damage in an attempt to get product out the door. A reputation for quality, once lost, is hard to get back.

What then should Budinski do if his plant manager tells him to "forget it and get the product out the door"? He might begin by asking, "What happens to the contract if USAWAY finds out what we're doing? What happens to you?" To these questions the plant manager might respond, "They'll never find out." These are "famous last words," a proverbial harbinger of disaster. Budinski should unhesitatingly answer, "The Germans have a saying, 'What two know, everyone knows.' Information like this has a way of getting out. Already everyone in Quality Control knows, plus some people on the assembly line. So, perhaps it would be smarter to assume USAWAY will find out than that they won't."

If the plant manager nonetheless persists, Budinski will have to draw a line. The plant manager's conduct threatens the welfare of both Budinski's employer, Clarke Engineering, and of Clarke's client, USAWAY. Both are relying on Budinski to control quality. His okay on a shipment invites others, both employer and client, to believe that he has checked everything in the approved ways and determined that everything at least meets specifications. If he gives his okay when he knows the product does not deserve it, he is in effect lying to those relying on his judgment. So, at the very least, he must tell the plant manager: "I can't say a shipment meets specifications when it does not. Clarke doesn't pay me to lie about quality."

Budinski probably can go this far without risking his job, but he probably should go at least one step further. He should try to get the plant manager to put his proposal to the Bright Light Test. "If you want to take personal responsibility for quality on this shipment," Budinski might continue, "you can do it. You're the manager. I won't object--so long as you inform the head office. They have a right to know you're risking Clarke's reputation." Considering his proposal under the hard light, senior management might shine on it, the plant manager may have second thoughts. For example, he may suddenly realize that, while he thought of his proposal as serving both his own interests and Clarke's, senior management might not see things that way. If anything went wrong, he would be--as the saying goes--"up a creek without a paddle." He might then draw senior management into the discussion.

What if senior management eventually approves sending USAWAY the products without notifying them of the failure to meet specifications? So long as Budinski does not have to vouch for the products' quality, he need do nothing more. The public safety, health, and welfare are not threatened. He has done about all he reasonably could to protect Clarke's reputation. He has given senior management a chance to do the right thing.

No doubt, Budinski's disappointment will be great, great enough perhaps to make him look for another job. Budinski should, however, not allow disappointment to overshadow the confidentiality he still owes his employer. He should not be the teller of "war stories" from whom USAWAY first learns of what Clarke did.

We must, I think, recognize that the temptation to "leak" something to USAWAY will be great, even if Budinski stays with Clarke. Clarke might benefit from such a leak. Letting that shipment go out over the objections of quality control will set a precedent. Clark will thereafter have more trouble maintaining quality--getting product "out the door" will trump quality--unless the USAWAY decision turns out badly. If USAWAY learns what Clarke did and responds forcefully, Clarke will not soon let timely delivery trump quality again. Clarke will have learned a lesson, one likely to make it a better company, a company its employees can respect.

Still the temptation to do good is here a temptation to do wrong. The NSPE Code II.4 recognizes Clarke's right to make business mistakes, even ones involving moral turpitude, provided they do not threaten the public safety, health, or welfare, or require an engineer's participation. (Compare NSPE Code II.1.a and II.1.e.)