

W. Gale Cutler's Commentary on "Cutting Roadside Trees"

Commentary On
Cutting Roadside Trees

Kevin Clearing, as an engineering manager, is confronted with a situation that is typical of many situations in which engineering managers find themselves. He is faced with trying to find a "right" answer to a problem that has no clear cut "right" answer. The approach to such a situation is to list the possible options, consider the advantages and disadvantages of each option and select what appears, after due consideration, to be the best option. (Some engineering ethics courses develop a decision making matrix for situations like this. Using a matrix, alternatives, selection criteria, and weighting factors are used to calculate mathematically what appears to be the optimum solution.)

Kevin clearing appears to have at least three options:

1. Maintain status quo of the roadway. Reduce the speed limit further.
2. Find an alternate route and eliminate the current roadway.
3. Widen the current roadway at the expense of the 30 trees.

Option #1 does not eliminate the problem because drivers are already known to violate the existing speed limit. (The thought proposed by the environmental group to sue drivers if they don't drive sensibly is an irrational, unenforceable solution and should be rejected.) Option #2, while it could be very effective, is probably not practical because it would involve a heavy expenditure of funds.

Option #3 seems to be the only workable solution and will involve Kevin's convincing the environmental group that the safety of users of the road is worth the destruction of the trees. To encourage the environmental group to withdraw their objection to this option, Kevin should develop a plan to do new tree and shrub plantings along the newly widened highway to restore its beauty and ecological integrity.

The citizen environmental group is a special-interest group and caution must be exercised in dealing with such a group. While special-interest groups frequently accomplish worthwhile results, they are also frequently guilty of so polarizing a situation that it is difficult to reach a rational decision. In this case, it is unfortunate that a logical best solution was not worked out without the local media adding to the turmoil of the situation.

The special-interest group must be approached in a spirit of compromise, settling differences by mutual concessions and reconciling conflicts through adjustments in attitude and conduct.