

Neil R. Luebke's Commentary on "Company Interests and Employee Involvement in Community"

Commentary On
Company Interests and Employee Involvement in Community

This case could easily form the plot for a three-day television miniseries. All the ingredients are here: environmentalists versus a large corporation, large metropolitan interests versus small town values, potentially thousands of people affected by the actions, and in the center of it all Elizabeth Dorsey, engineer, who might become a heroine, a goat, or even a sacrificial lamb. The possibilities of dramatic scenes of showdowns in corporate board rooms or City Council chambers boggle the imagination. In the miniseries, no doubt, the Committee for Environmental Quality, supported by mass rallies and marches by the citizens of Parkville, will eventually win over the City Council and send the political types from CDC packing back to the metropolitan area. Elizabeth Dorsey, fired from her job with CDC, will be almost immediately hired by a new environmentally conscious firm relocating in Parkville but without using a single square foot of the recreational and wildlife area. Parkville lives happily ever after, all because Elizabeth Dorsey was true to her principles. So much for drama.

The case before us, however, often has analogues in more mundane situations in the real world. The conflict between business interests, on the one hand, and personal or professional values, on the other, lies behind many of the most difficult and troubling cases in engineering ethics. As many writers have pointed out, the codes of ethics of the engineering societies often place dual and conflicting responsibilities on engineers: a responsibility to hold the public welfare paramount yet at the same time a responsibility to do one's best for one's client or employer. In our case, not only Elizabeth Dorsey but several other persons in CDC seem to judge these two obligations to be in direct conflict.

But must the obligations be in conflict in this case? First, as described in our story, CDC, Inc., seems to be an environmentally responsible corporation. Not only does it make a generous offer to the City Council concerning care of the wildlife and recreation area, but it is unlikely that Elizabeth Dorsey herself, given her environmental concerns, would work for CDC and feel any loyalty to it if the company was not environmentally responsible. Certainly, Parkville could have been targeted as a site for corporate building that would be far less hospitable to the environment than CDC's plan, so Elizabeth Dorsey's concerns with the environment seem not to, on the surface of it, be necessarily hostile to the CDC approach.

Second, we might ask, what is in the public welfare? The Committee for Environmental Quality is admittedly a small but active citizen group, and at least some maintenance of recreational and wildlife area seems to be important to the citizens. On the other hand, there are doubtless other interests in the town: employment interests, the possibility of greater local taxes for public improvements, and other economic benefits that go along with the location of a new firm in town. So it may be an open question whether the entire recreational and wildlife area that the Committee for Environmental Quality wants to preserve should justifiably be preserved. Committee members may own parts of the town, but they do not own it completely. Indeed, the corporation may have an interest in relocating out of the crowded metropolitan area into an area that would be pleasant for its workers. The corporate officers should realize that it has nothing to gain by spoiling its own new nest or by pursuing tactics that alienate a major portion of the community. Ideally, something like the following might happen: CDC makes its interests known to the Parkville City Council; the Parkville councilors then set up a number of public hearings and discussions so that various local groups can express their concerns and have their questions straightforwardly answered. Both city officers and CDC officials make an effort to be open and public in their dealings so that Parkville residents will not have the idea that some political shell game is going on behind closed doors. In the end, some mutual accommodation may be worked out. The Committee for Environmental Quality may come to see that preserving 75 percent of the recreational and wildlife area joined with a firm commitment from the City Council to maintain its noncommercial zoning, and with additional funds to help support the environmental development of the area, is a better alternative than several other imaginable ones. On the other hand, if the community is truly hostile toward CDC and has no interest in expanding its economic base at the expense of its small-town lifestyle, CDC might drop its plans.

Now let us turn to Elizabeth Dorsey. What moral considerations are appropriate to her decisions in this case? First, she should be honest with the people in her corporation as well as with the people in her community. Her interest in the environment is not in and of itself disloyalty to CDC. Furthermore, as a resident of Parkville, she is in a position to bring home to any official in CDC who asks her the concern of the community for a certain way of life. In fact, a CDC official might even be astute enough to ask her opinion about what should be done. Second, Elizabeth also has an obligation to maintain any confidential information that is the property of the company. It is difficult to believe that any information in a detailed proposal to a city council would remain confidential for long, however. Since Elizabeth has worked within the corporation, she might have a better perspective on the types of plans that CDC has and be in a position to put to rest any false rumors that members of the Committee on Environmental Quality might hear or circulate. The really difficult situation for Elizabeth occurs when three persons in the corporation, including her immediate superior, decide that she should be asked to soften up some of the City Council members. It is unfortunate that a committee member thought that such a softening-up routine would be a good tactic. It is also unfortunate the committee chair went along with the idea. When planning committee chair Jim Bartlett approached Elizabeth's boss, David Jensen, David should have expressed some qualms about asking Elizabeth to undertake a lobbying effort on behalf of the corporation, but he could have said to Jim that he would talk to Elizabeth about the corporation's plans in order to see whether she has any ideas or suggestions. David could say this whether or not he knew of Elizabeth's environmental concerns. It would not be fair for David to respond to Jim's request by saying, "Oh, Elizabeth's going to fight you every step of the way because she's a very active member of the Parkville Environmental Quality Committee." At that point Elizabeth would have been labeled the enemy in Jim's eyes without Elizabeth's having said a word.

Let us suppose that David Jensen does communicate Jim Bartlett's message to Elizabeth. Before committing herself to any course of action, Elizabeth ought to find out as much as she can about the plans. Perhaps she could ask to talk to Jim Bartlett himself or some of the members of the committee. She should also be up front with David Jensen, Jim Bartlett, or anyone else at the corporation concerning her interest in the environment and her work with the Committee on Environmental Quality. She should make it clear in the process that she is not in any manner opposed to the CDC corporation or with a possible CDC plant location in Parkville. Her only qualms have to do with the specific site and the possibility of resulting environmental

damage. She should also inform the persons that the City Council has gone on record as opposing economic development of the area when it came at the expense of the environment. Finally, Elizabeth should, insofar as she can, push for a public and open discussion of CDC's proposal.

If, after learning all the facts, Elizabeth Dorsey is still firmly in opposition to the CDC move, then she has some hard decisions to make. At one extreme, she might choose to remain completely neutral in the matter, refusing to take any role that is favorable either to the committee or to CDC. At the other extreme, she might decide she could no longer work for CDC, resign her position, and devote herself full time to fighting their proposal for Parkville. On the other hand, if she sees merit in the proposal, she is confronted by a different set of choices. In either case, her challenge is to balance her public commitments with her professional commitments while at the same time maintaining her personal integrity.

How would Elizabeth's situation be viewed by other persons concerned with the case? A citizen of Parkville would, I think, expect a number of things from Elizabeth. There is the expectation that she would not do in her fellow citizens simply in order to continue to receive a paycheck from the corporation. At the same time, the citizens would not want her to be unsympathetic to other concerns in the community besides environmental concerns, since if Elizabeth led the fight and was an employee of CDC corporation it is clear that she could garner considerable publicity for herself and her cause, publicity which would look so damaging that CDC might scrap the plans completely. In short, a fellow citizen of Parkville might be concerned that Elizabeth not misuse her special position. Although some members of the Committee for Environmental Quality might want Elizabeth to be their reformer "inside the tent," they ought to be more sensitive to her special position, a position in which no matter what she says she might be misunderstood. The committee members should expect Elizabeth to be straightforward with them and honest in her evaluation of the merits of CDC's plans. The company and its officials should not attempt to dictate Elizabeth's ideals or force her to compromise them. On the other hand, they may also rightfully expect that Elizabeth would not act in such a way as to embarrass the company or unjustifiably to impugn its good name.