

Michael Davis' Commentary on "Company Interests and Employee Involvement in Community"

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Company Interests and Employee Involvement in Community

People like to advise someone in Elizabeth Dorsey's situation, "You cannot serve two masters." The advice confuses Dorsey's situation with that of a slave.

A slave has a master, an owner with absolute power over him. Only one person can have absolute power over you at any one time. You can only serve that master properly by serving no other. A slave with divided loyalties is, by definition, a bad slave.

Dorsey is not a slave. She is a free person. A free person has no master. Having no master leaves her free to develop relationships with whom she pleases. With such relationships come loyalties, commitments, and other interests. Sooner or later some of those interests will come in conflict. Freedom is messy.

Freedom is especially messy for engineers. The engineer, simply by working as an engineer, undertakes to serve the public, clients, employer, and profession--four "masters". The engineer also tries to serve himself in a morally appropriate way. That is, he tries to earn a decent living by serving public, clients, employer, and profession in the way engineers should. Each profession tries to define itself so that, for example, serving the public does not conflict with serving one's employer. But, since human foresight is weak, such conflicts still occur.

Dorsey has conducted herself as a good engineer should. Not only has she used her engineering knowledge to benefit her employer, she has made it available to a citizen's group she believes to be serving the public interest. She has, in the words of the NSPE Code III. 2.a, "[worked] for the advancement of the safety, health, and well-being of [her] community." And, as a result, she is in trouble.

Her employer has asked her to lobby for it. Lobbying is normally the responsibility of Public Relations (or some other department without engineers). Nonetheless, engineers may properly participate in lobbying as engineers. They may provide help on technical questions. An engineer could, for example, properly make a presentation to Parkville's city council explaining how CDC's plan would protect the environment.

An engineer's participation in lobbying is, however, necessarily limited. An engineer cannot put the weight of her professional judgment behind whatever her client or employer wants. She must believe what she says. Deception cannot be part of her job. Engineering codes of ethics are unanimous on that. (NSPE Code III.3.a.)

Yet, down the chain of command has come this request for Dorsey's non-technical help in lobbying for CDC's proposal. What can be said about the request itself? There is, I think, nothing inherently wrong with it. But for her interest in Parkville's environment, Dorsey might have been happy to do as asked, lobbying not as engineer or loyal employee, but simply as Liz Dorsey, commuter (someone who would like to work nearer home).

So, David Jensen, her supervisor, has no reason not to convey the request to her. Indeed, whether he knows of her activities in Parkville or not, he has an obligation to give her the chance to decide for herself what she will do (as well as an obligation to his superiors to do as asked). He should, however, consider which Dorsey he is asking (engineer, loyal employee, or commuter). Which he thinks he is asking will affect his tone and may well affect how Dorsey responds.

Dorsey's problem is the result of her (properly) having a life of her own about which her employer (or a part of it) does not know. CDC has ignorantly put Dorsey in a bind. What should she do? If Jensen sounds at all like a superior when he asks her to lobby, Dorsey's first impulse will probably be to protect her privacy, avoid confrontation, and tell a "white lie". While such lies are (generally) morally permissible, they are not consistent with an engineer serving her employer as a faithful agent. White lies do not meet "the highest standard of integrity [in professional relations]". (NSPE Code III.1) An engineer who feels it necessary to tell an employer white lies should seek a new employer. Something has gone seriously wrong between her and her employer.

What should Dorsey do? She might begin by explaining everything to Jensen and asking his advice. He is a potential ally. He may well dislike having to ask a subordinate to do something "political". He may know how firm the request is, what assumptions it rests on, and how best to respond. The request is not necessarily written in stone. It might even be written in water, no sooner made than forgotten. Senior executives do not always appreciate the effect their works will have on subordinates. Jensen is more likely to be helpful if treated as a helper.

But let's suppose the worst. Though Dorsey seeks Jensen's help, he eventually sighs in exasperation, "I'm only the messenger. You must decide for yourself and take the consequences." What should Dorsey do now? She must, I think, say something like this: "Sorry. No can do. I've been working with the Parkville Environmental Quality Committee for more than a year now. They'll certainly oppose CDC's plan. I don't want to choose between CDC and my neighbors. Tell the people upstairs that I have a conflict of interest."

Dorsey should, I think, say something similar to the Parkville Environment Quality Committee even if she believes CDC is clearly in the wrong. Unless she is willing to quit CDC now, she should not directly help the Committee. The most she should do is advise the Committee on how to find another engineer. She should do no more than this for at least three reasons.

First, openly confronting CDC is likely to poison her relations with her superiors. She has access to information outsiders would not have. CDC probably has no way to know whether any of that information is relevant to the Parkville plan. They are therefore likely to view her as a potential spy, an enemy within.

Second, the public is likely to suppose that she knows more than she in fact does. Employees generally do not openly oppose their employer unless it is doing something outrageous. Dorsey is likely to be identified as a CDC employee. Her opposition will therefore carry more weight than it would had she no connection with CDC. CDC will find her status as an employee working against it. Unless CDC has done something to deserve that disadvantage, Dorsey should not treat her employer as if it does.

Third, Dorsey probably can't conduct herself properly while working for CDC and helping the Committee. The more headlines she gets for the Committee, the more likely her relations at work are to go sour. The more her work relations sour, the

more likely she is to overdo or underdo what both CDC and the Committee need to have done right. She would not be able to provide either with the independent judgment she guarantees anyone for whom she works as an engineer.

So, she should thankfully take Bartlett's advice when it comes. "Cooling it" will allow her honorably to maintain good relations with both her employer and her neighbors. Being an engineer does not require her to choose between them this time.