

Kenneth L. Carper's Commentary on "Company Interests and Employee Involvement in Community"

Commentary On
Company Interests and Employee Involvement in Community

Elizabeth Dorsey is involved in a moral dilemma arising from a conflict in roles. Her role as a citizen of Parkville and an environmental conservationist is in conflict with her role as an employee of CDC, Inc. Role conflicts always present difficult ethical challenges because they test loyalties and commitments (Nelson and Peterson 1982).

This commentary will first consider Elizabeth's personal dilemma as presented in the case study, from Part I through Part XII. After consideration of Elizabeth's situation, a few additional questions arising from the field of environmental ethics will be presented.

I & II

Elizabeth becomes aware of the role conflict. Her employer is seeking expansion space, and none is to be found in the inner city where the firm is now located. Parkville's recreational and wildlife area is an attractive site for CDC, but it is Elizabeth's hometown and she has been instrumental in keeping commercial development out of the area.

Elizabeth's situation is made more difficult by the pressure exerted by CDC management. This pressure is not appropriate. David Jensen should not accede to Jim Bartlett's request, whether or not David is aware of Elizabeth's role on the Parkville Environmental Quality Committee. David should defend Elizabeth based on her value to CDC as an engineer, not as a potential political agent.

The type of pressure Jim Bartlett seeks to exert on Elizabeth would use her merely as a means to an end, rather than respecting her as an intrinsically valuable human being (Rachels 1986, pp. 114-117). What he is demanding of her has no relationship whatsoever to her professional obligations.

David should inform Elizabeth of Jim Bartlett's request, so she will be better able to assess her situation and make informed choices. This information should be presented in a non-threatening way, and David should also assure Elizabeth of his support.

In his discussion with Elizabeth, David may be able to gain some insights regarding the environmental quality of the Parkville site. Her opinions may be useful to the CDC Planning Committee, so they can be more informed as to the impact of the committee's proposal on the environment.

III & IV

Elizabeth is presented with the opportunity to reveal her conflict. The sooner she discusses this with David, the better. Employers have an obligation to avoid placing employees in situations of apparent conflict of interest, but in order to do so, they must be informed. If David isn't already aware of her past work, Elizabeth should definitely discuss this with him and enlist his support. She may be headed for an unpleasant confrontation and she will need informed allies, whose support is founded in mutual understanding and trust.

V

The dilemma presented in Part V should never have arisen. Truthfulness earlier would have kept Elizabeth out of this situation. Avoiding truthfulness in conflict of interest situations merely delays the confrontation and makes it more severe.

David now is in a very awkward situation. He has been forced to admit to his superior that a subordinate has been less than candid with him. His ability, and his desire, to support Elizabeth in later confrontations may have been damaged along with his credibility. However, neither David nor Jim is justified in ordering Elizabeth to "cool it." Such action involves excessive demands for loyalty and is clearly an

abuse of management authority (Martin and Schinzinger 1989, pp.174-177).

VI

The option presented in Part VI is a good approach. It effectively takes Elizabeth out of the controversy. She won't help. She is not friendly with the Council, and she identifies the reason. She doesn't support CDC's proposal and makes it clear that she couldn't possibly be an effective advocate for CDC even if she did support the proposal.

This action shifts the burden for the ethical dilemma back to CDC management. Elizabeth has not threatened to use her position to either undermine CDC plans, or to profit within the firm from her unique relationship with Parkville.

VII

Jim again demands that pressure be exerted on Elizabeth to "cool it." David should discuss with Jim the moral implications of this pressure. Also, David has the responsibility to inform Elizabeth again of her precarious situation. If David really values her as a person, he will offer to help sort out the alternatives and potential consequences with her. Combining their two perspectives may enhance understanding.

VIII

Elizabeth should not break confidentiality with her employer when the opportunity is presented. She has some responsibility to her employer in this regard. The information will soon become public. Elizabeth's neighbors may be upset with her, but she should be able to articulate her reasons for confidentiality. Reference could be made to the ABET Code of Ethics which states that "Engineers shall treat information coming to them in the course of their assignments as confidential." Some have noted that this statement is too broad (Martin and Schinzinger 1989, pp. 182-188). Certainly, employer confidentiality should be breached in cases involving public safety.

Other alternatives could be defended on moral principles, should Elizabeth be absolutely convinced that her silence will prevent proper public planning procedures from occurring. A careful assessment of potential outcomes should be undertaken before Elizabeth reveals her privileged information.

IX

In Part IX, Elizabeth is forced to evaluate the strengths of her conflicting commitments. Proceeding further publicly may seriously jeopardize her career with CDC. Other role conflicts may also emerge at this point, such as her role as economic provider to her family. Her public position really shouldn't jeopardize her future with CDC, as it has nothing to do with job performance. However, in this circumstance, the threat is clear. Certainly, any informed party would find it acceptable for Elizabeth to step aside and let the CDC proposal be judged on its own merits.

X

Elizabeth decides to make a public statement. If she is going to speak out, it should be done in this way. She has a right to political positions as a citizen. This includes the right to provide input to land-use planning decisions. But she has correctly expressed these opinions in general terms, consistent with her past public positions on the subject. The media may establish the connection between Elizabeth and CDC, but she importantly has not directly and specifically criticized her employer in the public arena.

However, Elizabeth's public statement does carry some important connotations. It may actually serve to "muddy" the decision-making process so that Parkville residents are not able to look objectively at the CDC proposal. Hopefully, Elizabeth has carefully considered her unique position of influence prior to speaking out.

With regard to the continuing threats from Jim Bartlett, David should reply forthrightly. He should tell Jim that he did convey Jim's warnings to Elizabeth, but that he tempered the information with his own judgment and offered Elizabeth his support to exercise her conscience.

There may be a component of sex discrimination in Jim Bartlett's attitude. Special care is required of managers in situations where males have traditionally held dominant management positions. In these situations, female employees find it more difficult to be assertive. David should ask Jim if he would make the same implied threats and charges of disloyalty towards a male employee in Elizabeth's position.

XI & XII

Parts XI and XII investigate the perspectives of the Committee for Environmental Quality and the typical Parkville citizen. Elizabeth should discuss her opinions with the Committee for Environmental Quality, but she shouldn't take a leadership role unless she is willing to jeopardize her job.

It is probably more important that Elizabeth ask to discuss her concerns with the CDC Planning Committee, especially if her concerns are founded in specific issues of unique environmental sensitivity. Elizabeth is not going to be an effective advocate on either side, for her motives will be questioned by both sides. Her conflicting roles inject unnecessary confusion. Parkville residents should be allowed to review the CDC proposal objectively. Consideration of all the facts in an open public forum should enable the community to judge the proposal on its own merits.

Additional Questions

The role conflicts encountered by Elizabeth in this case study are so interesting that one might overlook some equally interesting moral questions from the field of environmental ethics (Martin and Schinzingler 1989, pp 262-278). Space does not permit discussion of these questions, but a thorough review of the case should include the following:

1. Why does Elizabeth commute 60 miles each day if she is truly concerned about environmental quality? What form of transportation does she use?
2. Is the Parkville site unique? Is it particularly sensitive to development? Or is this a case of the "Not In My Backyard" objection to changing land use?
3. Has Parkville become an exclusive community for affluent commuters, and if so, have the original residents been displaced by the high taxes associated with preservation of undeveloped land?

4. What about the citizens who live in the big city, those who can't afford to live in Parkville? Do they have regular access to the environmentally protected area, or is it enjoyed only by the residents of Parkville?
5. Denial of the CDC proposal may result in further congestion and pollution of the inner city. What are the ethical implications resulting from this alternative?
6. Can communities like Parkville hold out forever? There are many examples of quality environmental projects involving cooperative business and government alliances. Maybe this is the best opportunity Parkville will ever have to preserve its quality of life, considering economic and environmental factors. Is it possible to sacrifice a little in order to preserve most of an environmental asset?
7. Consider the implication of CDC's plans as they impact the inner city. Abandoning the current location will reduce the tax base that supports city services. How will this affect those who must live in the city?

These questions deal with broader environmental issues. They are not directly related to Elizabeth Dorsey's dilemma. If we had specific answers to the questions about Parkville, however, we might be able to better assess the fundamental moral principles guiding Elizabeth's reasoning.

Suggested Readings:

1. Martin, Mike W. and R. Schinzinger 1989. *Ethics in Engineering* (2nd edition), McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York, NY.
2. Nelson, Carl and S. R. Peterson 1982. "Conflicts of Roles in Engineering Ethics," *Journal of Professional Issues in Engineering*, American Society of Civil Engineers, New York, NY, Vol. 108, No. E11, January, pp. 7-11.
3. Rachels, James 1986. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA, pp. 114-117.