

Joseph Ellin's Commentary on "Occupational Health"

Commentary On
Occupational Health

Don is trying to research health problems he fears may affect workers at ABC Manufacturing. He shows admirable initiative and concern for fellow employees. But his supervisor, Cal, prefers that potential health problems remain unknown, presumably for fear that ABC will have to make costly changes in the factory. To this point, Don's actions indicate commendable concern for the welfare of others, extending beyond his official responsibilities.

Now we're supposed to believe that Cal has blocked Don's access to the library. Don should confront Cal with this and get it cleared up. If Cal has covertly refused Don's library access, he is being sneaky and shows himself to be untrustworthy. If he has reason not to want Don to use the library, he should order Don directly not to do so. Don should simply tell Cal that there are other libraries and he's going to get the article he wants somewhere, so Cal should stop being so petty. If Cal then orders Don to drop all further investigation into the problem, Don has the right to tell Cal that it's not within Cal's authority to control how he uses his free time.

Suppose Don confirms his suspicions about the workplace chemical. In that event, he should initiate whatever steps are necessary to obtain company and OSHA review. This may not be easy, or even possible, but Don's responsibilities don't go any further than putting the problem on the way to solution. Don is not himself responsible for seeing that the problem is resolved; there are labor unions, government regulations, law courts and all the rest for that. As an engineer, his responsibility goes no further than to see to it that these other channels are activated.

However Don might not want to do any of this in order not to antagonize his superior. He then obviously has a bit of a dilemma. If he's really afraid of Cal, he might be justified in dropping the investigation, or at least dropping it after discretely putting someone less exposed onto it, for example, the employee's labor

union. He won't like this, but if he doesn't comply, he may have a fight coming, and may be disciplined or lose his job. This doesn't affect his ethical position, but he's entitled to temper ethics with prudence.