

Ted Lockhart's Commentary on "Disposing of Toxic Waste"

Commentary On
Disposing of Toxic Waste

L. Bryan might easily convince himself that it is not his responsibility to subject himself to the possibility of getting fired for disobeying the directive he has been given. After all, he is only a summer employee who needs the job to pay his way through college. He is not yet a member of the engineering profession and therefore has no obligation to "hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public." The responsibility for whatever environmental damage or violations of environmental regulations would result from dumping the coolant down the drain is Max's and possibly Max's superiors. Of course, Max's arguments for dumping the coolant are very unconvincing, and there is little doubt about the meaning of Max's thinly veiled threats against Bryan. Furthermore, Max is probably right that Bryan's going ahead and dumping the coolant on this one occasion, and perhaps on the few occasions on which he will be called on to perform similar acts during his temporary employment, will have no discernible effects on the environment. Why then should he risk antagonizing Max further by continuing to resist Max's directive and quite possibly losing his job as a result? More-over, even if he were to refuse to dump the coolant, there is little reason to doubt that task would simply be assigned to someone else who has fewer qualms about doing what he/she is told.

However, there are good reasons for L. Bryan not to carry out Max's directive. L. Bryan should consider not just the consequences of his actions on the one or few occasions on which he would be called on to dump toxic substances into drains but rather the consequences of the practice of similar persons in similar situations performing similar actions. And the latter consequences are significant and can be expected to have significant negative effects on the safety, health, and welfare of the public. If no one refused to participate in such a practice, then it is difficult to see how the practice itself would ever be stopped. And if someone should at some point refuse to participate, then why shouldn't L. Bryan do so under the present circumstances? Of course, there may be little hope or expectation that Bryan's

sacrificing his summer job and jeopardizing his career plans would catch on and start a ground swell of workers' refusing assignments that endanger or harm the environment. But this is not the point. We would not say that one has no duty to vote in an election if he/she is reasonably certain that his/her vote would not affect the outcome of the election. The appropriate question is "What if everyone in your situation did what you are contemplating doing?" This is also the question that L. Bryan should ask himself in deciding what to do in the situation in which he finds himself.

Given what is at stake for Bryan, we should not blame him if he decides not to be a hero, and he deserves praise if he chooses the heroic course. But questions of praise and blame are not really the crucial issues for the decision-maker. L. Bryan has the best reasons for doing what would be best to do in the situation. And that means that he should respectfully but firmly refuse to carry out Max's directive.