

C.E. Harris' Commentary on "Disposing of Toxic Waste"

Commentary On
Disposing of Toxic Waste

L. Bryan is in a difficult situation. He seems to believe that complying with Max's order is both illegal and wrong. Yet he has little if any power in the company and is in danger of losing a valuable job if he disobeys. Furthermore, he is faced with the necessity of making an immediate decision. He might decide that he just does not want to do something that he considers wrong and that he has already earned as much as most students earn in a summer. If need be, he can take out a student loan. He might also believe that his example of refusing to dump the coolant could have an effect on company policy.

On the other hand, he might decide to dump the coolant down the drain. He might argue that one more dumping will not make that much difference, and it will give him a little more time to make a decision. He might also believe that staying on will have more effect on company policy than merely quitting or being summarily fired. This is a factual issue, having to do with the likely consequences of various courses of action.

There are other factual considerations as well. Is Max's claim that the toxins will settle to the bottom correct? L. Bryan might be able to go to the local library and find the answer to this question. Then there is the question of his chances of changing Max's mind. Max would appear to be the kind of person whose mind is not easily changed. Does L. Bryan know anyone else in the company who might listen to his side of the story?

Suppose L. Bryan discovers that Max's theory about how to reduce the toxic effect has no validity at all. He also confirms his suspicion that repeated dumping of the toxins into the drain is not only illegal, but a considerable source of environmental pollution and a potential health hazard. Finally, he decides that there is no possibility of changing Max's mind. This is the way Max has done things for years, and he is not

about to change. The only way Max will change is to receive an order to do so from his superior.

At this point L. Bryan should spend some time attempting to imagine as many possibilities and scenarios as he can. He wants to do something that will not only preserve his personal integrity and protect the environment, but also preserve his job. It may not be possible to do both, but he should at least try. If the company is large enough to have an "ethics hotline" or an ombudsman or an officer in charge of corporate responsibility, he should certainly make use of the opportunities that these resources afford. If not, he should lay his case before Max's superior or the personnel officer.

L. Bryan should think long and hard about how he can approach Max's superior in a non-confrontational way. One possibility is to say that he (Bryan) has a problem with dumping the toxic waste into the drain. This approach avoids pointing an accusatory finger at Max or other employees. He might then ask for advice on how he can handle his problem. He might combine this approach with an expression for the possible legal difficulties that the company might face. If he can do so, L. Bryan should also approach his superior with some specific plan in mind. He should not only point out a problem, but offer a possible solution.

If this is done in a way that is both sincere and non-confrontational and if L. Bryan manages to find a receptive person, he has a good chance of both protecting the environment and protecting his job. If not, he may have to face an unpleasant choice. However, he should try to avoid such choices wherever possible. "Preventative ethics" tries to eliminate the need for making tragic choices.

It is important to see that this attempt to avoid tragic choices is not being less ethically responsible, but more ethically responsible. This is because such an approach would satisfy more moral demands. If he is successful, L. Bryan would not only have protected the environment by means of a change in company policy, but he would also have satisfied a legitimate moral obligation to himself by saving his job.