

Joseph Ellin's Commentary on "Using Company Resources"

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Using Company Resources

Like many engineers written up in ethics cases, Michael Green spends some of his time listening in on other people's conversations. These informal investigations never prove fruitless; Michael learns that Al House is abusing his company privilege of borrowing tools.

Al is far senior to Mike and Mike won't confront him directly. So he does the right thing and reports the abuse to proper authority. Al is not impressed by Mike's loyalty to the company and decides to determine who the stoolie is. He asks everybody directly which one 'ratted' on him.

Obviously XYZ company has walked into this by allowing Al to cross examine his subordinates. Evidently XYZ is not able to deal effectively with this abuse of policy. Al's boss should have made it clear to Al that the identity of the person who 'ratted' was confidential company information that he was not to attempt to find out; presumably Al is in enough hot water already not to want to disobey this order. And the other engineers in Al's unit should have been notified not to cooperate with Al if he should try to question them.

Is XYZ company really interested in preventing abuse of privileges? If they are, Michael would seem pretty secure in simply admitting to Al that it was he who turned him in. What can Al do about it, since presumably Michael is protected by Al's superiors? Any retaliation Al takes against Michael can be reported, and Al gets into deeper trouble. But if this seems too risky to Michael, he can refuse to answer, telling Al that he doesn't think it's an appropriate question to be put to a fellow engineer (which it isn't). Al can draw his own conclusions, but since he's clever enough to figure out that one of the other engineers in the unit might have turned him in and then lied about it, Michael's refusal to answer might not only protect Mike from Al's retaliation but might earn him a couple of points in Al's mind as someone

who can't be easily intimidated. Meanwhile Michael should report Al's attempt at intimidation and make it clear that he expects XYZ to protect him if Al should retaliate. Michael is actually in the stronger position here and should make use of his advantage.

Instead, Michael lies to Al. There are cases in which lying is the only way out, but this doesn't seem to be one of them.