Wade L. Robison's Commentary on "Using Company Resources"

Commentary On
Using Company Resources

It is wrong for Al House to order tools that had "no significant use" for his unit at XYZ in order to use them on his own home building projects. That, presumably, is a given. He is cheating the company just as surely as if he dipped into the cash drawers and took out whatever money he needed in order to purchase the tools for himself. The only possible benefit of cheating the company as he did was that other employees might also borrow the tools, and they would thus be benefitted in a way that they would not be if Al were to steal the money to buy the tools for himself.

The moral issue concerns what one ought to do when one knows that someone is stealing from the company for which one works. The complications arise because the person doing the stealing is in some position of power over the person aware of the cheating and because the one person within the same unit who could be talked to is thought unreliable and untrustworthy.

Michael Green, who knows of the cheating, is unwilling to confront Al House or inform the chief engineer. It is not obvious that either position is morally defensible or otherwise appropriate. Consider the chief engineer first. When Michael Green went to the Contract Procurement Agent, the latter talked to the chief engineer who then confronted Al. It may be that Michael thought that if he went to the chief engineer, nothing would happen and that it is the Procurement Agent's having talked to the chief engineer that made a difference. Or it may be that Michael thought that the chief engineer would tell Al that it was Michael who "ratted." In any event, from how things worked out, it looks as though all Michael had to worry about was having the chief engineer tell -- since, in fact, the chief engineer did confront Al when informed of the problem. He did what he needed to do, that is. And Michael could have given him a chance to do that without seeing the Procurement Agent. If the chief engineer refused to act because it was Michael telling him rather than someone outside the unit, or higher up, then it would be time enough for Michael to

go to the Procurement Agent -- after informing the chief engineer that that is what he would do.

As it is, Michael has effectively informed the Procurement Agent--by the act of going to him first -- that he does not trust anyone in power within his unit. He has also effectively informed the Agent, by asking him not to inform Al House who has told, that he expects Al to be vindictive. So he has passed on to someone outside the unit negative judgments both about Al's character--he is vindictive as well as someone willing to steal from the company -- and about the chief engineer's character.

In addition, the result of Michael's not confronting Al up front, or telling the chief engineer and giving permission that he be named as the person who knows what is going on and is willing to talk about it, is that everyone in the unit has to confront Al House and be questioned about what he did. The effect of that sort of confrontation is, among other things, that everyone will know both that Al has stolen from the company, that Al suspects that someone in the unit knows, and that whoever knows is not willing to come forward to be identified.

But what were Michael's options? If he confronted Al, then what would the result be? Even if Al then and there ceased to order tools for his own use, his past misconduct would go unpunished, and Michael would risk putting his own position at some risk -- at least insofar as what he did depended upon Al. So confronting Al puts Michael in an awkward position and does not seem to solve the essential problem. What, for instance, is to prevent Al from doing the same sort of thing again, this time somewhat more discreetly, making sure that whatever he orders bears some, however little, relationship to his unit's needs?

What is problematic about the case is that Michael faces such choices. One ought not to arrange matters in such a way as to presume that anyone is likely to cause harm to the company or any of its employees, but matters ought to be arranged so that if someone does, then an effective means of rectifying the situation exists so that neither the person bringing the complaint nor the person against whom the complaint is brought risk being treated unfairly. One needs evidence to make an accusation, but the person accused needs a chance to rebut the evidence, give, that is, their side of the story.

Having an ombudsman would help in such a situation -- someone outside any particular unit of a company whose job it is to listen to concerns about such issues

as that facing Michael. Such a person would presumably be committed to strict confidentiality, but also be committed to taking any accusation seriously enough to pursue it, to find out whether there is evidence that it is true and then, if there is, to see to whatever needs to be done given the truth of the accusation.

In short, what is morally problematic in the case in question is something structural within the company, namely, that Michael has so few options available to him when he wants to do what is right. Someone who is concerned to see that the company they work for is not cheated should not have to risk such harm in order to initiate whatever is necessary to rectify matters. One does not want to encourage reckless accusations, made without evidence, but one also does not want a structure that unnecessarily discourages those who would to help the company and/or its employees from being harmed by someone within the company.