

Lea P. Stewart's Commentary on "Dissent About Nuclear Safety"

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Dissent About Nuclear Safety

Alison Turner is concerned about the safety assumptions being made in her work place. This is an important question, but it takes on even more significance in Alison's work place--a nuclear power plant. This case revolves around two important ethical issues: (1) How can a group make the best decision about safety?; and (2) What is an ethical employee's responsibility in terms of expressing his or her opinion?

In terms of its safety decisions, it seems that the company who runs this nuclear power plant has asked the committee Alison is part of (the PNSRC--Plant Nuclear Safety Review Committee) to wear two different and potentially conflicting hats. In a famous example from the discussion that occurred before the Challenger explosion several years ago, a manager at Morton Thiokol asked an engineer who had opposed the launch to "take off his engineering hat" and put on his "management hat." When he responded to the question as a manager, he recommended launching the space shuttle under the conditions specified. This example illustrates that the decision recommended by an engineer may not be the same as the decision recommended by a manager. Asking people on one committee to play both roles may lead to disastrous results.

One reason for the potential danger in this situation is a phenomenon called "groupthink," discussed by Irving Janis in his book, *Groupthink* (Houghton Mifflin, 1982). In situations of groupthink, members of a group don't want to "rock the boat." They agree to a consensus to support the group even though individuals may disagree with the decision. Rich Robinson, the chair of the committee, has made it clear that it is important to act quickly to avoid a costly shutdown. He has set the tone for the meeting and set the stage for groupthink. It seems as if he has a decision made before the group even discusses anything. When someone suggests that additional calculations could easily be made, one person reminds another not to

rock the boat by saying, "Our track record is excellent, and the system is optional. It's not as though we're taking any extraordinary risks." The group never has a chance to critically examine the situation.

When the vote is being cast, Alison must decide her responsibility to express her doubts about the decision. According to Albert Hirschman in the book, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (Harvard University Press, 1970), employees have three options in situations such as this one: exit, voice, or loyalty. In other words, they may decide that the problem is significant enough that they are forced to quit their jobs and leave the corporation (exit). They may speak to their supervisors or anyone else who might be involved and try to convince them of their concerns (voice). Or they may remain loyal to the company and do nothing believing that the company knows best and the problem will be solved in due time. If Alison decided to use the voice option in this situation, she would cast a negative vote. In this way, she would be communicating her dissatisfaction with the committee's decision. Of course, she could abstain (in essence, the exit option) or vote for the decision (loyalty). Each decision is significant and each carries its own risks. If she casts a negative vote, she remain true to her doubts but has the potential not to be seen as a team player. Her future promotions could be affected. If she abstains, she walks a middle ground--she expresses some dissatisfaction, but may still be seen as a reluctant member of the team. If she casts a positive vote, she goes along with the group, remains part of the team, but her voice has been lost.

To avoid putting any individual in this difficult position, this group could have used a more systematic method of assessing the risk involved in the important decisions they are asked to make. For example, in their book, *Acceptable Risk* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), Fischhoff and his colleagues present seven objectives that they believe a method for assessing risk should meet: comprehensive, logically sound, practical, open to evaluation, politically acceptable, compatible with institutions, and conducive to learning. They note that not all methods meet these criteria, but any method can be examined in light of the criteria. The PNSRC might have avoided groupthink if they had made an attempt to examine their decision-making procedure more systematically. Of course, these criteria do not assure that any decision is sound, but they are one more way of checking to make sure that all areas have been explored before a group chooses a solution to an important problem.

Decision making about risk is a difficult thing to do. It is even more difficult when it is done by a committee that has to consider the implications of the decision for a number of different constituencies. Nevertheless, this area of decision making is extremely important. The committee must be structured so that each employee has a voice and can act as ethically as possible within the parameters of the decision to be made.