

Ted Lockhart's Commentary on "Owning up to a Failure"

Commentary On
Owning up to a Failure

I

For Walt not to say anything at all would suggest that he agreed with Norm's views. However, to disagree openly with Norm in the meeting would undoubtedly embarrass Norm, who might perceive Walt's actions as disloyal both to him and to R&M. A compromise course of action would be for Walt to ask for a short recess in the meeting so that he could confer with Norm and inform him of the change in Walt's views about the failed equipment. Such a request would probably catch Norm by surprise and place him in the position of having to choose between defending a false position or reversing his views about the source of the equipment problem. However, this seems a less undesirable state of affairs than to be contradicted by Walt directly during the meeting. For Walt not to say anything at all until after the meeting would constitute his participating in the promulgation of false information and would not be adequately justified by any ethical considerations, such as loyalty to employers. Therefore, the most reasonable course of action for Walt is to ask for a brief recess in order to confer with Norm.

II

The course of action that Norm is recommending may produce the best overall consequences if the equipment failure is highly unlikely to reoccur in the future and if R&M's openly accepting fault would cause XYZ to purchase inferior equipment from R&M's competitors in the future. Perhaps Norm believes that this is what would probably occur. However, if XYZ is firmly convinced that the equipment failure is R&M's fault, then for R&M to continue to refuse to acknowledge this fact may well

antagonize XYZ, even with R&M's 'good will' gesture. From the information given, it is difficult to say how XYZ would react to R&M's taking the negotiating position that Norm is recommending, but it is probably safe to assume that neither Walt nor Norm would be very certain what XYZ's reaction would be. What is certain is that the course of action that Norm is recommending is deceptive and dishonest. In the absence of ethical considerations adequately supporting Norm's recommended course of action, Walt's view that R&M should be open and honest about the equipment failure in its discussions with XYZ is the reasonable position.

The problem is, of course, a "management problem" in the sense that R&M management must decide what to do. However, since Walt is being asked to go along with and support Norm's judgment it is also his problem, and for Walt automatically to defer to Norm in this matter without considering the ethical ramifications of such a deferral would be for Walt to fail to act autonomously.



Engineers who move into management should realize that engineers' dissenting from management's views on technical matters as well as on business matters is not uncommon and that for management to expect and to insist that engineers not take any position on any issue that is incompatible with management's position on that issue violates engineers' autonomy and conflicts with engineers' obligations to be objective and truthful. Engineering managers must recognize that engineers' dissenting from other engineers' views and from management's decisions is not unusual and that it is unreasonable to expect blind obedience from them.

Engineers can reasonably be expected to be judicious in choosing the ways in which they express their dissent, but they should not be expected to express it only when and how management chooses.