Michael McFarland's Response to Practitioner on "Occidental Engineering"

Commentary On
Occidental Engineering

I would like to offer the following response to Mr. Truitt.

I appreciate Mr. Truitt's insights about how good engineering practice could have prevented some of the difficult ethical choices that arose in the case. I would agree that both the manager and the engineer failed to live up to their professional obligations. This is a very helpful contribution to the understanding of the case and the issues it raises.

It was never my intent to let either of the principal agents "off the hook" in my analysis of the Occidental Engineering case. I am sorry if I gave that impression. I think the analysis gave a clear account of how they violated important ethical norms.

In the last part of the analysis that Mr. Tuitt objected to, I was asking the reader to go beyond the more familiar account of personal responsibility, which I agree is of the greatest importance, and look at more subtle issues of institutional responsibility. It is not an either/or situation. The fact that a third party contributed to a moral lapse does not excuse the person who committed that lapse. To use a rather extreme analogy, if a drunk driver kills a child, to say that the party host who allowed the obviously intoxicated person to drive home bears some responsibility does not in any way excuse what the driver did or shield the driver from responsibility for the consequences. It rather recognizes an additional truth that the host also bears some responsibility for the harm done.

This can apply to institutional structures as well. The structural context within which people operate strongly influences their moral behavior. That is the reality. Good laws, for example, make for a good society, both because they discourage harmful

behavior and because they create less of a penalty for those trying to do what is right. It is the same way with the rules, norms, expectations and rewards built into corporate and professional structures.

It is important to recognize this especially in cases where we have some responsibility for shaping those structures, as engineers and managers often do. The issue is not one of blame, but of responsibility. We certainly have responsibility for following ethical norms in our individual behavior. Mr. Truitt is quite correct about that. But in addition we also have a shared responsibility for building an environment that facilitates ethical behavior on everyone's part. Ultimately that can have an even greater impact in making a better society for all of us.

It seems Mr. Truitt also objects to the non-judgmental approach I have taken in general. That was a pedagogical judgment I made. In the case and its analysis, my purpose was not to judge myself who was right and who was wrong, but to give the readers some principles and methods, some tools we might say, for making those judgments themselves. I also wanted to illustrate the complexity and subtlety of some of the issues involved. None of this is to say that we should not make moral judgments. We must. The purpose is to help us make them in a more thoughtful and nuanced manner, to understand why and how we make them, and to be able to communicate them more persuasively. All of that is very important in the complex social and institutional environments in which most engineers must function.

This text is a reply to [**Duane J. Truitt - A Practitioner's Response to "Occidental Engineering"**](#)