



GVV Case Study – International Negotiations, Part A

John is a new Resident Engineer deployed in Afghanistan with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He is responsible for over 50 construction projects in his region and he employs a number of local construction inspectors to oversee the quality of many of the larger-scale projects. These local inspectors were paid from a consolidated contract managed by the Corps of Engineers office in Kabul; John was responsible for certifying the inspectors' timesheets on a monthly basis. The first time the inspectors turned in their timesheets, however, John was puzzled. Every inspector submitted a timesheet that reflected 16 hours per day, every single day of the month. John knew the inspectors could not have worked that many hours, so he called all the inspectors in for a meeting to sort things out.

John started the meeting by expressing his concerns about the accuracy of the timesheets. After some heated discussion—made all the more difficult by language and cultural barriers—John realized that the inspectors were not being 'dishonest' about the timesheet, but were doing what came naturally to them in their environment: they were submitting the first offer in a negotiation. "Of course we didn't work 16 hours a day, every day of the month. What's your counteroffer?" John felt conflicted. He wanted to be a good steward of American taxpayer dollars, so he wanted to pay a fair and honest wage to his inspectors. The inspectors, however, saw their timesheets as a negotiable document.

John sought guidance from his supervisors, but to his surprise they weren't concerned about paying the inspectors for hours they didn't work. In fact, from the perspective of higher echelons of command, spending more money meant that progress was being made in war-torn Afghanistan, so John soon felt pressure to pay all of his contractors as much as possible! He decided to work within the culture's established norms of negotiation, but he also wanted to be responsible with taxpayer dollars. What could John do to resolve both sides of the problem?

This material has been adapted for the Online Ethics Center from the Giving Voice to Values content created by Dr. Mary Gentile.