



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Disposing of Toxic Waste

Author(s)

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Year

1992

Description

Just moments ago, Bryan's supervisor, Max Morrison, told him to dump half of the used coolant down the drain. Bryan knew the coolant was toxic, and he mentioned this to Max. But Max was not swayed.

Abstract

This case is one of thirty-two cases which address a wide range of ethical issues that can arise in engineering practice, provided by the Center For the Study of Ethics in Society, Western Michigan University.

Body

Engineering student L. Bryan Springer has a high paying summer job as a forklift operator. This job enables him to attend college without having to take out any student loans. He was now staring at a 50 gallon drum filled with used machine coolant, wondering what he should do.

Just moments ago, Bryan's supervisor, Max Morrison, told him to dump half of the used coolant down the drain. L. Bryan knew the coolant was toxic, and he

mentioned this to Max. But Max was not swayed.

Max:

The toxins settle at the bottom of the drum. If you pour out half and dilute it with tap water while you're pouring it, there's no problem.

Bryan:

I don't think that's going to work. Besides, isn't it against the law?

Max:

Look, kid, I don't have time for chit-chat about a bunch of silly laws. If I spent my time worrying about every little regulation that comes along, I'd never get anything done -- and neither will you. Common sense is my rule. I just told you --Toxins settle at the bottom, and most of them will stay there. We've been doing this for years, and nothing's happened.

Bryan:

You mean no one's said anything about it? That doesn't mean the environment isn't being harmed.

Max:

You aren't one of those "environmentalists," are you? You college guys spend too much of your time in the "ivory tower." It's time to "get real" -- and get on with the job.

Bryan:

But....

Max:

But nothing. Time to get off yours and do the job. You know, you're very lucky to have a good paying job like this, kid. In three months you'll be back in your cozy college. Meanwhile, how many other college kids do you think there are out there wondering if they'll be able to afford to go back -- kids who'd give their eye teeth to be where you are right now.

Max then left, fully expecting L. Bryan to dump the used coolant. As L. Bryan stared at the drum, he pondered his options.

What options do you think he has? What do you think he should do?

Notes

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