

C.E. Harris' Commentary on "Requested to Falsify Data"

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Before evaluating morally the actors in this drama, it may be helpful to look at Stephanie's way of handling the problem. Even if she did the right thing, did she do it in the right way? One of the important things that young professionals should learn as quickly as possible is that how one does something is sometimes as important--or almost as important--as what one does. The aim of a conscientious professional should be to avoid whistleblowing while still doing the right thing. Becoming a martyr should not be one's goal; rather, one's goal should be to act morally and responsibly while not becoming a martyr. This depends to a great extent on how one goes about doing what he believes ought to be done.

Assuming for the moment that Stephanie did the right thing, how could she have done it in a way that would not be so confrontational? Here is where imagination is crucial. Suppose Stephanie had said,

Adam, I know you are concerned about the employee time it takes to fill out the reports, but I feel so strongly about this that I would be willing to work up the reports on my own time if you will agree to submit them. Even if the company has to pay a fine, we will be on the right side of the law.

Expressions of personal conviction such as this often have a strong influence on other people. However, Stephanie might decide that this approach would never persuade Adam and that another more hard-headed approach might work. She might point out to Adam that these excessive leaks are eventually going to find their way back to regulators. If the company manages to conceal this one, there will be others. And when the regulators find out, the company will be in for some severe fines and its reputation as an environmentally conscious manufacturer will be clouded.

She might even decide that it is ethically permissible to agree to go along with

Adam this time on the condition that he consider a different approach next time. Or perhaps she might simply confront him with her own misgivings--without accusing him of anything--and ask to be transferred. This might serve to stimulate his own conscience in a non-threatening way. Or perhaps the company has an ombudsman with whom she could consult.

If none of these ameliorating tactics works, Stephanie (and, later, Bruce) must make more difficult decisions. It is probably safe to assume that the small amount of additional pollutant is not going to be a significant health hazard. One moral issue, however, has to do with whether or not Stephanie and Bruce will participate in actions which are at least minor infractions of the law. There are certainly considerations of self-interest here. Could these two young professionals get into serious legal difficulties if the infractions were discovered?

Let's say that both Stephanie and Bruce decide that a single minor infraction might be something their consciences could accept. They might reason from a utilitarian perspective, which requires that we maximize the well-being of everyone who is affected by the action. From this perspective they might reason that, if they refuse to obey their superior, the harm to their own careers would be so great and the good that would accrue to the public would be so small, that their harm outweighs the public good. (After all, from a utilitarian perspective, their own well-being should be considered as important as the well-being of any other individuals.)

The real difficulty with this solution is that this type of incident will probably be repeated. It is clear to Stephanie and even clearer to Bruce that Adam intends to violate the law on a regular basis. This means that the harm to the public will be multiplied by many similar incidents. Stephanie and Bruce must also ask themselves about the consequences to other managers in the company and to other companies of violating the law on a regular basis. Whatever the final outcome of the analysis, this consideration makes complicity in Adam's actions more difficult to justify.