

Michael Pritchard's Commentary on "Dissent About Quality"

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Dissent About Quality

Although convinced there may be reason to prefer catalyst B to A, Bernie may also be convinced that deferring to the judgment of the more experienced engineers is the best course of action -- especially in this kind of situation. He may actually be persuaded that the others are probably right. His is a minority view, and he is considerably less experienced. The recommendation apparently cannot wait for further testing. Besides, Alex is Bernie's division head, and Bernie may believe that his job is to do as he is told. So, Bernie may conclude, it is best to support his colleagues' recommendation -- both from the standpoint of Larom, Inc. and his own self-interest.

However, four cautions should be noted from the outset. First, although Bernie may have a general obligation to do what he is told by his superiors, blind or unthinking obedience is not obligatory. He has no obligation to do anything illegal or unethical, regardless of which "authority" requests it. In this case, it is not at all clear that Alex's superiors at Larom would approve of his effort to falsify the report, or that they would fault Bernie for refusing to comply with Alex's request. After all, the report is for them. Why would they willingly agree to be duped -- especially since approving the wrong catalyst could turn out to be very costly to Larom?

Second, Bernie should be alert to the possibility of what sociologist Irving Janis calls groupthink (Groupthink). This is the tendency of cohesive groups to arrive at consensus at the expense of critical thinking. Janis identifies eight "symptoms" of groupthink:

1. The illusion of group invulnerability. ("We've always been right before.")
2. Shared stereotypes. ("We/they" thinking about those outside the group who may disagree -- the other as "enemy.")
3. Rationalizations.
4. Unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality. ("We're all committed to

doing the right thing.")

5. Self-censorship by individual members. (Reluctance to "rock the boat.")
6. The illusion of unanimity. (Silence taken as agreement.)
7. Direct pressure applied to ensure conformity when dissenting opinions are expressed. ("We can't wait forever.")
8. Mind-guarding. (Keeping outsiders who have dissenting views from presenting their views directly to the group -- "I'll pass your concerns on to the group.")

Several of these symptoms seem to be present at the initial meeting. There is evidence that at least some of the senior members of the group share the illusion of invulnerability ("We've been working on projects like this for years....").

Rationalizations for not having done more research on catalyst B follows on the heels of this illusion. Given the shared purpose of recommending the best catalyst for the job, the members may believe in the inherent morality of the group ("We know we're on the right side"). Silence in response to Alex's final look around the room for further comments may be the result of some self-censorship (especially if Bernie fails to speak up). This, in turn, feeds the illusion of unanimity. Finally, Alex's evident desire to orchestrate the group to a quick and decisive resolution indicates a readiness to apply direct pressure to any dissenters. Given that much may be at stake for Larom in this situation, Bernie is well advised to be alert to such group dynamics, rather than simply deferring his more senior colleagues.

Third, Bernie seems to be the only one with evidence that catalyst B might be preferable, and his previous work with catalyst B has already impressed Alex. If he does not speak up, who will? It is unfortunate that Alex did not assign Bernie to work on catalyst B earlier. Perhaps sometime earlier Bernie should have made a special point of discussing with his colleagues some of his previous work with catalyst B. But why didn't Alex take the lead? It seems that an opportunity for significant research when Bernie first joined the R&D Division was lost. However, shifting responsibility to Alex for lacking foresight does not relieve Bernie of responsibility for speaking up now.

Fourth, Bernie is not only asked to suppress data about catalyst B but also to alter the other data. That is, he is asked to lie. Alex no doubt sees this as a lie intended to "protect the truth," since he believes that catalyst A really is best. However, as Sissela Bok convincingly argues, even lies of this sort are ethically questionable (Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life). She points out that we have a tendency to overestimate the good that comes from lying and to underestimate the

harm that comes from lying. Individually and collectively lies do much to undermine trust. Also, by deceiving others, lies often lead people to make decisions they would not make if they had more reliable information, thus undermining their autonomy. Bok concludes that we should lie only after looking carefully to see if any alternatives preferable to lying are available.