

Lea P. Stewart's Commentary on "Company Interests and Employee Involvement in Community"

Commentary On

Company Interests and Employee Involvement in Community

While reading this case, two questions kept entering my mind: "Why are CDC employees acting this way?" and "Where is the CDC public relations department?" Contrary to popular belief, 'public relations' is not a dirty word. In the contemporary view of public relations, it means communicating the organization's message to its publics. These publics can be outside the organization (in this case, the citizens of Parkville and, in some sense, Elizabeth Dorsey) or inside the organization (Elizabeth Dorsey and the other employees). Because it did not rely on a well-defined public relations effort, CDC, Inc. put Elizabeth Dorsey and her co-workers in dangerous ethical territory.

CDC has decided to expand its operations by building a new facility. The planning committee has decided that the most desirable location would be in Parkville, a small town with citizens committed to preserving its recreational and wildlife areas. We can hope that the planning committee considered citizen opposition to its plan when deciding on this course of action and decided that other aspects of this location made the construction of the new facility desirable in spite of difficulties in obtaining the necessary legal permits.

Deciding on the site for the new facility was a task assigned to the planning committee. Assuming that they did their jobs well, CDC truly needs this particular site for its new facility. This is a decision that is clearly within the function of a planning committee. Nevertheless, once they have made this decision and convinced the appropriate organizational decision makers of the soundness of their plan, their job is done. There is no reason for a member of the committee to request that one of CDC's employees ask another employee to "soften up" the Parkville City Council members. This request is asking an employee to serve as a lobbyist for the organization. That function requires specialized skills is not part of the standard job

of an engineer.

Asking Elizabeth Dorsey to serve as a lobbyist for CDC places her in a precarious ethical position. She is being asked to serve as an advocate for an organizational decision. This role is clearly beyond her job function. In addition, she is being asked to serve as a mediator between her employer and her community. She is being asked to perform a task that should be performed by employees in the public relations department. These individuals are trained to present the organization's position to the public and have agreed to do this task. In addition, public relations practitioners follow a code of ethics for their profession and can seek guidance from their professional association (the Public Relations Society of America) if they feel they have a potential conflict of interest.

Clearly Elizabeth Dorsey feels caught between her desire to serve the environmental needs of her community and the desire of her employer for a new facility. CDC has placed her in an untenable position. If she reveals her environmental activism to the chief engineer of her unit she can be accused of not supporting her organization. If she does not reveal her previous activity in Parkville she can be accused of lying to her supervisor. By asking her to perform an inappropriate task, CDC has forced her to choose between her previous environmental activities and her employer. No matter which option she chooses, in some way she is harmed.

This case is particularly distressing because there is no reason for Elizabeth Dorsey to be placed in this situation. If CDC, Inc. wants to site a new facility in a town, they should ask the appropriate organizational employees to lobby for this effort. If the corporate public relations department is not capable of this task, an outside firm can be hired. These employees will follow their profession's ethical guidelines, and CDC engineers will not be asked to perform tasks that are not part of their organizational responsibilities.