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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Exceeding Pollution Limits

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Year

1998

Description

Marvin has just prepared a report that indicates that the level of pollution in the plant's water discharges slightly exceeds the legal limitations. However, there is little reason to believe that this excessive amount poses any danger to people in the area; at worst, it will endanger a small number of fish. On the other hand, solving the problem will cost the plant more than $200,000.

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

I

Marvin Johnson is Environmental Engineer for Wolfog Manufacturing, one of several local plants whose water discharges flow into a lake in a flourishing tourist area.

Included in Marvin's responsibilities is the monitoring of water and air discharges at his plant and the periodic preparation of reports to be submitted to the Department of Natural Resources.

Marvin has just prepared a report that indicates that the level of pollution in the plant's water discharges slightly exceeds the legal limitations. However, there is little reason to believe that this excessive amount poses any danger to people in the area; at worst, it will endanger a small number of fish. On the other hand, solving the problem will cost the plant more than $200,000.

Marvin's supervisor, Plant Manager Edgar Owens, says the excess should be regarded as a mere "technicality," and he asks Marvin to "adjust" the data so that the plant appears to be in compliance. He explains: "We can't afford the $200,000. It might even cost a few jobs. No doubt it would set us behind our competitors. Besides the bad publicity we'd get, it might scare off some of tourist industry, making it worse for everybody."

How do you think Marvin should respond to Edgar's request?

II

No doubt many people in the area besides Marvin Johnson and Edgar Owens have an important stake in how Marvin responds to Edgar's request. How many kinds of people who have a stake in this can you think of? [E.g., employees at Wolfog.]

III

Deborah Randle works for the Department of Natural Resources. One of her major responsibilities is to evaluate periodic water and air discharge reports from local industry to see if they are in compliance with anti-pollution requirements. Do you think Deborah would agree with the Plant Manager's idea that the excess should be regarded as a "mere technicality"?

IV

Consider the situation as local parents of children who swim in the lake. Would they agree that the excess is a "mere technicality"?

V

A basic ethical principle is "Whatever is right (or wrong) for one person is right (or wrong) for any relevantly similar persons in a relevantly similar situation." This is called the principle of universalizability. Suppose there are several plants in the area whose emissions are, like Wolfog Manufacturing's, slightly in excess of the legal limitations. According to the principle of universalizability, if it is right for Marvin Johnson to submit an inaccurate report, it is right for all the other environmental engineers to do likewise (and for their plant managers to ask them to do so). What if all the plants submitted reports like the one Edgar Owens wants Marvin Johnson to submit?

VI

Now that you have looked at the situation at Wolfog from a number of different perspectives, has your view of what Marvin Johnson should do changed from your first answer?

Notes

This case is an adaptation of "Cover-up Temptation," one of several short scenarios in Roger Ricklefs, "Executives Apply Stiffer Standards Than Public to Ethical Dilemmas," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 1983.

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Online Ethics Center
Authoring Institution
Center for the Study of Ethics in Society at Western Michigan University