

Case Study: The National Conductor – Was He Morally Responsible?

Background

- A national railway system was under pressure to improve efficiency and reduce delays. Conductors and staff were instructed to **prioritize punctuality**, as the public image of the railway was suffering.
- One evening, a conductor prepared to depart a busy intercity train. During the final safety checks, a junior staff member flagged a **possible brake fault** in one of the compartments. According to protocol, the train could still be dispatched if the defect was *not confirmed* as critical by the technical team. However, calling in technical staff would delay the train by at least 45 minutes.

The Incident

- The conductor faced pressure:
 - **Management Pressure:** The station supervisor reminded him that late departures would trigger penalties for the team.
 - **Passenger Pressure:** Hundreds of commuters were growing restless, demanding an immediate departure.
 - **Personal Pressure:** The conductor's performance review (and bonus) depended on punctuality.
- He made the decision to **proceed with departure**, reasoning that the defect was likely minor.
- Halfway through the journey, the suspected brake fault caused a **serious malfunction**, leading to a derailment.
 - Several passengers were injured, and two fatalities occurred.
 - Investigations revealed the conductor had **technically followed company policy**, but he also had the authority to delay the train in the interest of safety.

Applying Ethical Theories

1. Deontology (Duty-based):

1. Duty to protect lives must override schedules.
2. By not delaying, he failed his moral duty despite following rules.

2. Utilitarianism (Consequences):

1. The harm (injuries, deaths) far outweighed the benefit (avoiding a 45-minute delay).

2. From a utilitarian view, his choice was unethical.
3. **Virtue Ethics (Character-based):**
 1. Courage, integrity, and prudence should guide professional behavior.
 2. A virtuous conductor would have delayed the train, despite pressure.

Questions

1. How does understanding the importance of professional ethics help determine whether the conductor was morally responsible, even if not solely legally liable?
2. How should professionals solve ethical dilemmas when company policies conflict with their ethical values?
3. To what extent do established professional ethics support or challenge the idea that external pressures (deadlines, complaints, performance reviews) can excuse ethical lapses?