

COM6655 Professional Issues Autumn 2022

Tutorial for week 1 (27th September): An ethical dilemma

Scenario

The Sheffield Tractor Company (STC) has a reputation for manufacturing heavy-duty earth-moving equipment. Its Military Division produces more tank turrets, hulls, and suspensions than any other UK contractor. For many years the Military Division sustained STC by its aggressive marketing of military hardware overseas. Over the last 5 years, however, defence spending cuts worldwide have seen orders for tank parts substantially decrease. Because STC was so dependent on tank hardware revenues, management was faced with the task of significantly reducing the workforce.

The Board of Directors of STC had never experienced such tough economic times. They decided to downsize (or as they put it, "reorganize"), reducing the payroll in each division by 10% over a six-month period. The severity and speed of the cut left little room for compromise. In some departments, workers were laid off without consideration of the value or length of their service at STC. The drastic downsizing was certain to cause resentment and ill will.

At STC's world headquarters in Darnall, Bill Baker worked as a software engineer. He designed and implemented 3D modelling programs. His department had suffered its share of cuts, and it seemed to everyone that the workload was greater than ever. Employee morale was at an all-time low.

In Bill's eyes, what his department needed was a good laugh, preferably at the company's expense. Maybe that would boost morale. He approached the department's test data designer, Betty Hastings, who was his closest friend and confidante. He told her about his idea for distributing a document that would be good for a laugh. Betty thought it was a good idea and even offered to help, but Bill said he preferred to work alone.

Bill composed a memo mocking the "reorganization." This memo poked fun at senior management and contained some four-letter words that, although common enough in motion pictures, are not used in polite society. After composing the memo, and signing it "Management," Bill distributed it through e-mail to all workers in his department.

The effect of the memo was immediate. Several people in Bill's department e-mailed it to other departments, and it travelled rapidly throughout the company. People laughed at some phrasings and wandered from one office to another to share discovered double meanings. A few workers blushed at some of the words, and some said, "I just don't find it at all funny." Bill sensed success. When asked who wrote it, however, he said, "I don't know." Betty also said nothing, though of course she knew who had written it.

Eventually, the division director, Harriet Corrigan, got a copy. Harriet didn't like the memo at all. It was difficult enough to reduce the size of the division without what she called "this kind of insensitive criticism."

Harriet promptly ordered technicians to identify the workstation from which the memo originated. They had no difficulty identifying the source. Bill was fired. But because Bill's job was crucial to the division, Harriet was obliged to replace him immediately. Betty Hastings replaced Bill the next day. This was fortunate for Betty, because her position as test data designer had been eliminated by the reorganization.

Adapted from Kallmam & Grillo, Ethical Decision Making and Information Technology, McGraw Hill.

In your breakout groups

- One member of your breakout group should be given the role of rapporteur – they should take notes and be prepared to speak on behalf of the group at the end of the tutorial.

Discussion points

- What are the key facts in this scenario?
- Who are the key stakeholders?
- What are the main ethical issues here? (i.e. should someone have done something, or not done something?)
- Are there any legal issues here?
- What steps would you take to improve/resolve the current situation?
- What policies/strategies would you introduce to prevent reoccurrence?