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# **Professional Ethics (HS-219)**

*Assignment 1  
(Week 2)*

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# Case Study



**Instructions: Read the case study and answer the questions given on the next page.**

On August 10, 1978, a Ford Pinto was hit from behind on a highway in Indiana. The impact of the collision caused the Pinto's fuel tank to rupture and burst into flames, leading to the deaths of three teenage girls riding in the car. This was not the first time that a Pinto had caught on fire as a result of a rear-end collision. In the seven years following the introduction of the Pinto, there had been some 50 lawsuits related to rear-end collisions. However, this time Ford was charged in a criminal court for the deaths of the passengers. This case was a significant departure from the norm and had important implications for the Ford engineers and managers. A civil lawsuit could only result in Ford being required to pay damages to the victim's estates. A criminal proceeding, on the other hand, would indicate that Ford was grossly negligent in the deaths of the passengers and could result in jail terms for the Ford engineers or managers who worked on the Pinto. The case against Ford hinged on charges that it was known that the gas-tank design was flawed and was not in line with accepted engineering standards, even though it did meet applicable federal safety standards at the time. During the trial, it was determined that Ford engineers were aware of the dangers of this design, but management, concerned with getting the Pinto to market rapidly at a price competitive with subcompact cars already introduced or planned by other manufacturers, had constrained the engineers to use this design. The dilemma faced by the design engineers who worked on the Pinto was to balance the safety of the people who would be riding in the car against the need to produce the Pinto at a price that would be competitive in the market. They had to attempt to balance their duty to the public against their duty to their employer. Ultimately, the attempt by Ford to save a few dollars in manufacturing costs led to the expenditure of millions of dollars in defending lawsuits and payments to victims. Of course, there were also uncountable costs in lost sales due to bad publicity and a public perception that Ford did not engineer its products to be safe.

# Reflective Questions



1. Were the engineers working on the Pinto presented with a very clear dilemma as per the engineering ethics?
2. Were there any trade-offs made so that the Pinto could be successfully marketed at a reasonable price?
3. Where does an engineering team strike the balance between safety and affordability and, simultaneously, between the ability of the company to sell the car and make a profit?