

Bill has been hired as a student engineering assistant for the summer by Acme Plastics. His superior is Frank Jones, the plant production engineer, who believes in management by strict chain of command, and whom Bill finds intimidating. Bill very much needs the job to earn fees for the coming year. His duties frequently take him through an assembly line area where he observes the following conditions. Workers on an assembly line glue together several small plastic parts which are then placed on a conveyor belt that carries them through a heating oven where the glue is set. By the end of the day drops of glue have accumulated on the conveyor belt. So, at clean-up time, the workers, using rags and soup tins filled with solvent, which they obtain from a nearby barrel, wipe the belt as it passes by. Bill notices that during this process the oven is not shut off. It occurs to him that under these conditions an explosion could take place in which workers could be hurt seriously. Frank Jones has canceled the normal bimonthly safety meetings until further notice because he considers them a waste of time and an impediment to productivity.

What is Bill morally required to do in this case? why?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Bill is morally required to voice his concerns to Frank. Engineers have a professional obligation not only to regard the public's safety as paramount, but also as a corollary, to so view the safety of fellow employees at work. This obligation applies to Bill, though still a student, in virtue of his working in the capacity of an engineer. Alerting one's immediate superior within an organization to a condition one believes may be hazardous to fellow employees clearly falls within the scope of this obligation. Sometimes acting to fulfill one's professional obligations may involve an element of personal risk in terms of one's personal interests, but in this case, the risks do not seem great, even given Frank's expressed attitude toward safety meetings.

Case from the 1995 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995.