

Case Study:

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Situation

Rachel Hawks, a newly appointed junior engineer in a small Canadian company, finds herself at the center of an ethical dilemma that challenges her professional integrity and moral values. In her new role, Rachel discovers that the company, despite maintaining high safety standards and a strong work ethic, is debating submitted falsified construction proposals for the purpose of securing new contracts for the company. Rachel is asked to provide false quotes and documentation that could have a potentially good outcome for a variety of situations. Her company would win the contract, securing her employment and her colleagues' employment. It helps a local indigenous community access critical infrastructure during non-winter months. And I may also help a local Member of Parliament win an election.

Rachel is conflicted as falsifying estimates are against the ethical virtues of a good engineer; however, she also is quite confident that if she doesn't do it that Peter (her supervisor) will. Additionally, by falsifying estimates and reports there is a higher likelihood of the project proceeding under her employer which provides overall good to her personal situation, employer, and surrounding community. Rachel has also been assured that both Peter and the MP are aware that construction projects often incur cost overruns. They believe that if Peter's company secures the contract, the project will be completed efficiently and without excessive additional costs to the community.

There is a moral conflict to halt an immediate injustice or allow it to proceed under the greater good.

Statement of the Ethical Dilemma or Ethical Issue

The ethical dilemma at hand revolves around the conflicting principles of professional integrity and community benefit. Rachel is faced with the moral quandary of whether to comply with her supervisor's request to falsify cost estimates in a bridge proposal or to uphold the ethical standards of honesty and integrity in engineering practice.

On one hand, Rachel recognizes that falsifying estimates is ethically wrong, as it involves dishonesty and could lead to subpar project execution, endangering public safety. On the other hand, Rachel is aware that the proposed bridge project has the potential to significantly benefit both the local mainland municipality and the isolated Indigenous community by providing cost-effective transportation during times of economic hardship. Additionally, the project has political backing that could secure federal funding, further emphasizing its potential positive impact on the community.

Rachel's dilemma is compounded by the financial strain her family is facing due to her husband's inability to find work in the area. She understands that refusing her supervisor's request may jeopardize her career and financial stability, while compliance may compromise her professional ethics.

Options for Action

Each of these options comes with its own set of risks and benefits, and Rachel must carefully consider her values, career goals, and the potential impact on her family, her career, and the communities affected by the bridge project when making her decision. Rachel faces a complex ethical dilemma with several potential courses of action. Her options include:

Comply with Peter's Request:

Rachel could choose to comply with her supervisor Peter's request to falsify the cost estimates in the bridge proposal. By doing so, she might avoid immediate conflict with her boss, potentially securing her job and financial stability. However, this option would require her to compromise her professional integrity and ethics, risking the safety and quality of the project. This would be a Utilitarian solution as it produces more overall good and/or less overall bad than would any alternative actionable choices.

Refuse to Comply and Report the Issue:

Rachel could take a principled stance by refusing to falsify the estimates as instructed by Peter. She might report the ethical breach to higher management within the company, an ethics committee, or an external regulatory body if necessary. This action would demonstrate her commitment to ethical standards and could protect her professional reputation. However, it might lead to confrontations with her supervisor, potential retaliation, or even the loss of her job, further affecting her family's financial stability. This would be an example of deontological ethical theories as it serves to approach the moral duty of Rachel to stand up for injustice and perform the right actions regardless of the outcomes.

Negotiate with Peter:

Rachel could engage in a dialogue with Peter to express her concerns about the ethical implications of falsifying estimates. She might attempt to find a compromise that aligns with both her ethical values and the company's financial needs. This approach could potentially lead to a mutually acceptable solution that doesn't involve unethical practices.

Seek Legal or Ethical Guidance:

Rachel could consult with legal or ethical experts to better understand her rights and responsibilities in this situation. She could seek advice from professional engineering associations or ethics committees, which could provide guidance on how to navigate the dilemma while upholding ethical standards.

Explore Alternative Employment:

Rachel might consider exploring other employment opportunities in the engineering field, either in the same region or elsewhere, where she can continue her career without compromising her ethics. This option could provide her with a fresh start and potentially alleviate the financial strain on her family. This scenario is most loses as it does not resolve the dilemma of the greater good nor does it address the problems with the system at hand.

Advocate for Transparency and Integrity:

Rachel could advocate for a culture of transparency and integrity within her company. By working with colleagues who share her ethical concerns, she may help foster an environment where such ethical dilemmas are less likely to arise in the future.

Discussion of the Relevant Ethical Values, Principles, and Applicable Moral Theories

Professional Integrity

Value: Professional engineers are expected to uphold high standards of integrity, honesty, and transparency in their work. Falsifying cost estimates violates the principle of professional integrity.

Principle: Engineers have a duty to prioritize the safety and welfare of the public and ensure the quality and reliability of their projects.

Discussion: Rachel, as a member of the engineer's guild, APEGA or equivalent. Would be bound to comply with the professional integrity standards of those associations. To maintain her status as an engineer with integrity it would be best not to break those standards.

...A code of Ethics is primarily a conventions between professionals. According to this explanation, a profession is a group of persons who want to cooperate in serving the same ideal better than they could if they did t not cooperate... A code of ethics would then prescribe how professional er to pursue their common ideal so that each may do the best share at minimum cost to herself and those she cares about. (Davis 1991)

Honesty and Truthfulness

Value: Honesty is a fundamental ethical value that involves telling the truth and not engaging in deceitful or misleading practices.

Principle: Engineers are expected to provide accurate and truthful information in their professional work, as it directly impacts the safety and efficacy of engineering projects.

Discussion: As a Canadian citizen it is generally accepted that people of this society are honest and truthful. That is a moral obligation of our society. That obligation extends into the professional realm as Rachel is expected to be an upstanding citizen of this society and be an example of those moral virtue. From a professional standpoint it would be in her interest to follow those virtues to maintain a professional interest that will carry her career forward.

Beneficence

Value: Beneficence involves doing good and promoting the well-being of others.

Principle: Rachel's proposed bridge project has the potential to benefit both the local municipality and the Indigenous community by providing cost-effective transportation during economic hardship. Acting in the best interest of these communities aligns with the principle of beneficence.

Discussion: Here is where the heavy conflict starts. Rachel has an opportunity to benefit multiple groups. Her personal employment is maintained, which is the sole income for her family. Her employer may win a big project which is good for staff and the business. The local indigenous community also benefits from the final project which may not go ahead without this choice.

Utilitarianism

Moral Theory: Utilitarianism evaluates actions based on their overall consequences, aiming to maximize happiness or utility for the greatest number of people.

Discussion: In this case, Rachel must weigh the potential benefits of the bridge project for the communities against the potential harm caused by falsifying estimates. Utilitarianism would require her to consider the net positive or negative impact on the affected communities when making her decision. Which in this case could be quite huge. The positive impacts affect her employment, the company as a whole, and the communities affects. While denying the choice may lead to negative impacts to all those factors.

Counter point to Utilitarianism: Nazi engineers (Rowan 2003, 158) The engineers of the World War 2 Nazi regime performed terrible acts of cruelty and experimentation on unwilling participants in the name of science and advancing the future of mankind. Much of this research is still useful today and does hold value however it was obtained by what would be considered Immoral conditions. Should it still be permitted to use such data?

Virtue Ethics

Moral Theory: Virtue ethics focuses on the character of the individual and emphasizes virtuous qualities such as honesty, integrity, and courage.

Application: Rachel's ethical decision should reflect her virtuous character. Virtue ethics would encourage her to act in accordance with her values and principles, even if it involves personal sacrifice or hardship.

Discussion: Rachel would like to be a good person and follow her personal virtues of being honest and having integrity.

Duty-Based Ethics (Deontology)

Moral Theory: Deontological ethics emphasizes the importance of adhering to moral duties and principles, regardless of the consequences.

Discussion: Rachel may believe that her duty as an engineer is to maintain the highest ethical standards in her profession. This perspective would guide her to prioritize honesty and integrity, even if it conflicts with her personal interests of providing benefit for others.

Statement of your Resolution and Justification

In this complex ethical dilemma, Rachel is confronted with a tension between her professional integrity, the potential benefits to the communities, and her personal well-being. The ethical values and principles listed above provide a framework for her to analyze the situation and make a decision that aligns with her values while considering the broader impact on society and her professional responsibilities.

From a professional standpoint the best course of action is to deny the request. This maintains professional standards and is the most defensible for a Canadian Engineer working under APEGA or relevant professional body. While Peter may still change the report, we know that Rachel has performed her duty as an engineer and provided the requested documents. Rachel should work with Peter to Advocate for Transparency and Integrity hopefully putting into place a better standard for her workplace that promotes honesty and trust while allowing them to win contracts and be successful.

Ultimately, her choice will reflect the ethical values and principles she prioritizes most in this challenging scenario.

References

Davis, Michael. 1991. "Thinking like an Engineer: The Place of a Code of Ethics in the Practice of a Profession." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 150-167.

Rowan, John, and Samuel Zinaich. 2003. *Ethics for the Professions*. Toronto, ON: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.