Ted Lockhart's Commentary on "Informing Employees About Layoffs"

Commentary On
Informing Employees About Layoffs

I

Tony may be right in judging that others would not want to receive the bad news until after Christmas. If so, then reciprocity would require that he delay informing the workers. Still the company vice-president is insistent that the workers be notified as soon as possible, and apparently Tony has not given any indication that he objects to doing so. Perhaps it is not clear why the layoff notices should go out so soon. Before Tony decides not to follow Raskin's directive, he should discuss the matter with Raskin, perhaps question why the notifications must be given on Christmas Eve, and explain his reservations about notifying the workers. Perhaps Raskin would react negatively to having his directive questioned and view Tony's reluctance to carry it out as insubordination, but it is also possible that Raskin has not thought his decision through completely and would be grateful for Tony's perspective on the matter.

A very important issue is whether the workers really would not want to know that they are being layed off until after Christmas. Of course, receiving the bad news now would not contribute to their enjoyment of Christmas, but this does not mean necessarily that they would not want to know that they are being layed off. Knowing as soon as possible would allow them to begin looking for other work right away and to plan for possible financial hardships ahead. It might also cause them to spend less extravagantly in any last-minute Christmas shopping in order to prepare with the loss of their main source of income. Thus it is entirely possible that the workers not only would wish to know of the impending layoffs right away but would resent not being informed earlier if Tony were to delay notifying them. Determining what the workers would want to know and what they would not want to know would be very difficult, and Tony would probably be very uncertain that he had judged correctly

whatever he decided to do.

Since it is probably the only ethical consideration that is relatively unproblematic in this situation, the most important consideration is simply the obligation to tell the truth and to give people important information affecting their welfare if it is available. To withhold such information because people might not want to receive it right away would be similar to a physician's withholding bad news from a patient about the patient's medical condition "for his/her own good". While paternalism is not always unjustified, the burden is always on one who chooses to act paternalistically to justify doing so. In Tony's situation, the special considerations that would justify Tony's paternalistically delaying notifying the workers that they are being layed off are not terribly apparent. Therefore, if further discussion with Raskin reveals no such considerations, Tony should go ahead and inform the workers this afternoon as directed.

II

Tony should respond honestly by giving the reasons why he chose to delay notification of the workers. Presumably these would include his desire not to spoil the workers' Christmas celebrations and his judgment that they would not really want to receive the bad news until after Christmas. It is unlikely, however, that this explanation would satisfy Arnold, since he may feel that if Tony intended not to carry out his request he should have let Arnold know so that the sort of embarrassing situation that actually occurred could have been avoided. Arnold would be justified in criticizing Tony's actions, not because Tony has not been blindly obedient to Arnold, but rather because Tony apparently did not respect Arnold's opinion enough to let him know that he disagreed with it. Perhaps Tony knows Arnold well enough to know how he would have reacted if Tony had questioned Arnold's decision to notify the workers immediately of their layoffs.

This might excuse Tony's actions if Tony were relatively certain that the workers would wish not to know until after Christmas that they were being layed off and if he were reasonably sure that Arnold would not be receptive to having his decision questioned. However, the first of these conditions, as has already been noted, apparently does not apply to this situation. Therefore, again, we must conclude that Tony acted improperly in not informing the workers of the layoffs.

III

Shirley might react very angrily to learning that Tony decided, in violation of Raskin's directive, to delay the notifications. She might believe that, in keeping such important information from her and the other workers, Tony had violated their right to receive any important information affecting their welfare that was available to him. By basing his decision to delay notification on his assessment of what was best for her, he deprived her of the opportunity to make that assessment for herself. Perhaps she can sympathize with Tony's dilemma and his motives, which appear to be beneficent. However, she can justly criticize his judgment in choosing to act on the basis of paternalistic motives and not to recognize her autonomy and her right to be informed of important information affecting her welfare and that of her family.