Henry West's Commentary on "Disposing of Toxic Waste"

Commentary On
Disposing of Toxic Waste

One thing that L. Bryan can do is to follow orders. Another is to do what he thinks ought to be done with the machine coolant. A third is to make an issue out of Max's or the company's environmentally irresponsible practices.

If he follows Max's instructions, dumping half of the used coolant down the drain, diluting it with tap water, L. Bryan himself is not going to get into any trouble. No inspectors are going to blame him, a summer forklifter following orders from his supervisor, for anything that may be illegal or detrimental to the environment. And 25 gallons are probably not going to make much difference anyway. He will keep his job; things will go on as before. If he feels uncomfortable today, maybe he won't be required to do something tomorrow that he thinks is harmful. If it happens day after day, he can then think about quitting or at least getting a different job next summer. After all, it is not his choice that the coolant be disposed of this way; so why should he regard himself as responsible? If the company were able to automate the process, they wouldn't even have a human forklifter involved. He is no more responsible than a mechanized conveyer belt would be.

Presumably half of the waste coolant is poured down the drain to avoid more expensive costs of disposal, by weight, of the coolant drums. Half empty drums don't weigh as much as full ones. Since Max has left and is presumably not watching, L. Bryan could do with the whole drum what he's expected to do with the half in which the toxins supposedly settle. Without emptying out half, he could take the full drum to its destination. He would then have not personally participated in the company's illegal and destructive activity. He wouldn't have done anything to change what they've "been doing for years, and nothing's happened", but he could feel that on that one occasion, the right thing was done. When Max found out, as he likely would, L. Bryan would certainly get balled out and probably lose his job, but he might believe it worth it to do what is the right thing to do.

The third possibility is to make an issue of the practice. He probably can't expect Max's supervisor not to know what is going on. How far up the supervisory scale would he have to go before anyone would care? Would anyone care anywhere up? If he isn't going to get a sympathetic ear from within the company, should he report the practice to some environmental group, either the state Environmental Protection Agency or some private group concerned with protecting the environment? Or a newspaperman who has been doing investigative reporting on violations of environmental regulations?

No matter how much L. Bryan believes in conserving the environment, which one to do depends partly upon the expected consequences.

If he takes the third option, how likely is he to bring about a change, how difficult will it be, how much will it cost him? If he goes over Max's head with his protest, he is most likely to get nowhere and to be out of a job. If he seeks publicity, how much trouble is it going to be to him, and how likely that he gets anyone's interest? These things happen everyday in thousands of companies. The environmental agencies have more than they can handle in reports of incorrect disposal of toxic chemicals. What good is his report going to be? And if he does gets someone's attention, who wants to make a legal case or an investigative report on it, is L. Bryan getting in over his head? He is supposed to have a summer job to make money to pay for school. Can he afford at this point to become a serious environmental activist?

If L. Bryan replaces the drum without emptying it, he has kept "clean hands" with regard to the company's polluting. He can think to himself that if all people refused to do things destructive of the environment, that would make a big difference. But what other people do is not affected by what L. Bryan does here and now. His 25 gallons don't make a big difference to the environment, but his disobeying the orders of his boss may make a big difference as to how much money he makes this summer.

Another possibility is that Max may be right. The toxins may settle to the bottom. Perhaps L. Bryan should do some research on the question before sticking his neck out in protest. He might also do some research on environmental law to see if the company is doing something illegal. If he finds out that toxins do settle so that the environmental damage is not as great as otherwise, but also finds out that what the company is doing is strictly illegal, is L. Bryan in an ethically better or worse situation? He is now working for a company which is not doing as much harm as he

feared, but it is one that is engaged in illegal dumping. What if L. Bryan were not a summer forklifter but a regular employee? How much difference would that make in the action which he should take?

Twenty-five gallons of toxic coolant may be a relatively small matter on the scale of current environmental destruction. What if it were not a half drum down the drain, but hundreds of drums into a river or lake? If you conclude that L. Bryan should do as he is told, when do you draw the line and say that he should not do as told? If you are an employee in situations like this, is it disloyal to go outside the company to expose their improper practices? Should you first have exhausted all possibilities of getting a change of policy by working within the company?

References

- Davis, Michael. "Avoiding the Tragedy of Whistleblowing", Business and Professional Ethics Journal, Vol 8, No 4, Summer 1988, pp. 3-19.
- Dandekar, Natalie. "Can Whistle Blowing be Fully Legitimized? A Theoretical Discussion" in Business and Professional Ethics Journal, Vol 10, No 1, Spring 1991.
- DeGeorge, Richard T. Business Ethics, New York: MacMillan Press, 1982. Goldberg, David Theo. "Tuning Into Whistle Blowing", in Business and Professional Ethics Journal, Vol 7, No 2, Summer 1988.
- James, Gene G. "In Defense of Whistle Blowing" in Business Ethics: Readings and Cases in Corporate Morality. Hoffman, Michael W. and Jennifer Moor (eds.), 1984.