

Decision-Making Exercises in Business and Science

Directions: Read the scenarios. Then choose the course of action that you think answers each one best. If you find that none of the actions mentioned is adequate, devise your own solution. (This exercise combines the format of the Lockheed ethics exam with the scenarios covered in the cases identified by this ethics initiative.)

1. An engineer notices a fine white powder covers everything in a room that has a laminating press. She asks the operator how long he has been working in this room. He replies that he has been working there for over ten years. The engineer is concerned that the health of this operator may be at risk from inhaling this powder for so long. What should she do?

- a. Do nothing. After all, it is not a part of her job description.
- b. Go to the nearest television station and talk with a reporter about this deplorable situation.
- c. Check into OSHA regulations concerning this powder. Should the regulations warrant it, notify OSHA of the problem. Then, through appropriate company channels notify the operator and make sure that he receives a thorough medical examination to determine if any harm has occurred. Then check to make sure that appropriate follow-up examinations are carried out.
- d. Your own solution...

2. A worker under your supervision has recently been fired for incompetence and repeated violation of confidential information. Several weeks later, the former worker returns to you asking for a letter of recommendation. He says you owe it to him; you fired him and he has not been able to find any work and has a family to support. What should you do?

- a. Write the letter praising him in the highest terms. Otherwise you would be responsible for any harm that would come to his family.
- b. Write the letter but only after making it clear to him that your letter would have to raise and discuss frankly his being fired.
- c. Decline to write the letter. Explain to him that you have a legal duty to be forthright in any such letter to future possible employers; any deception or omission would render you legally liable to them. This would render it impossible for you to recommend him in a favorable light.
- d. Try to delegate the problem to someone else.
- e. Your solution...

3. Marta Malasobras has been coming to work late for the several weeks now. She works in a small group and the other members have come to you to complain that her tardiness reduces the effectiveness of the entire group. When you confront her with this problem, she breaks down and cries: she has to drop her son off to school but the school gates do not open soon enough for her to get to work on time. She has been unable to find anyone to take her son to school. What should you do?

- a. Fire her. Chronic lateness to work is a serious offense and cannot be tolerated in any way.
- b. Discuss her problem with the rest of her work team. See if any temporary arrangement can be made to give her time to find someone to take her son to school.
- c. Delegate the problem to the work team. After all, empowering them with decision-making authority also makes them more accountable. It's their problem, not yours.
- d. Your solution...

4. Your company has decided to accept your recommendation to purchase a UV curing oven to increase productivity. When the oven has been delivered and readied for use, your supervisor asks you to begin using it even though the appropriate Environmental Quality Board permits have not yet been issued. He argues that such permission is pro forma anyway so why wait and lose valuable production time. What should you do?

- a. Do what your supervisor asks. The permits should arrive in a couple of weeks and nobody is going to find out that during that time you have been operating the oven without permits.
- b. Refuse to do it. Nobody has the right to ask you to do something illegal.
- c. Tell him that he can do so but only on his own authority. Then write a memo to him, his supervisor, and a coworker explaining that you disapprove of this decision.
- d. First, try to reason with him. Explain that even though you will probably not get caught, the severity of the fine and loss of reputation are not worth the risk. Add that as an engineer, you have a special obligation to safeguard the environment which includes strictly conforming to government environmental regulations.
- e. Your solution...

5. A skilled machine operator under your supervision has recently returned from maternity leave. She works a ten-hour shift two days a week; company policy is that workers are entitled to a ten-minute break every two hours and a half hour for lunch in the middle of the shift. She has asked you for permission to return home every two hours to nurse her baby. Since she lives ten minutes away from work, this would require her to violate company policy. What should you do?

- a. Tell her that she can either start bottle-feeding her baby or look for another job. You cannot get involved in the personal affairs of your employees
- b. Suggest that her husband bring the baby to work. She could then nurse the baby in the company's medical room during her regular, authorized breaks.
- c. Honor her request but set a time limit of, say, three weeks.
- d. Your solution...

6. A university coop student notices that workers who use catalyst A in a manufacturing process habitually violate safety protocols; this is quite disturbing since the student knows that catalyst A is carcinogenic. When he informs his supervisor of this and recommends another catalyst, B, his supervisor tells him that this is not something with which he should be concerned. Besides, the supervisor adds, he knows about catalyst B and would never consider substituting it because it is much more expensive. What should the student do?

- a. Do nothing. The supervisor is right. As a student he is here to learn, not to change things.
- b. Point out that as an engineer, he is committed to uphold the code of ethics, which states that public safety is of paramount concern. Since this is a safety issue, the coop student feels compelled to insist that the supervisor reconsider.
- c. Discuss the issue with his faculty supervisor and seek advice.
- d. Since this is clearly a public safety issue (worker safety), and since public safety is paramount, the student should go to the nearest television station and blow the whistle.
- e. Investigate the issue further on his own time. Document the danger of catalyst A and examine carefully if catalyst B is really much more expensive *all things considered*.
- f. Discuss the issue with the human resources department or with the supervisor of the manufacturing process to see if there is any way to better enforce safety regulations.
- g. Your solution...

7. A civil engineer working for the AAA drives past an subdivision and notices that a storage tank full of chlorine gas is located dangerously close to the crowded subdivision. Upon further inquiry, he finds that the storage tank belongs to a local, privately owned and run industry. When he discusses this problem with local governmental authorities, they tell him that their hands are tied. What should he do?

- a. Nothing. He is a civil engineer and this is outside his area of expertise.

- b. Nothing. He works for the AAA, and the tank is owned by a private industrial concern.
- c. He should drive to the local radio station and demand that they broadcast a warning to the residents of the urbanization. Then they can themselves take collective political action against the private company.
- d. He should continue working through governmental channels. For example, he could contact the Environmental Quality Board or OSHA to see if the location of the storage tank violates any regulations. Then he could correct the problem working through these governmental agencies.
- e. Go to the owner of the storage tank and try to persuade them to relocate the tank. If they refused, he could threaten to blow the whistle.
- f. Your solution...

8. Your company has recently entered into a cooperative venture with a Japanese firm. A team of Japanese engineers has come to your plant to teach your engineers a new manufacturing process. However, the senior member of this team, a Japanese engineer with very traditional cultural views, refuses to work with a female member of your team despite the fact that she is a highly qualified engineer. What should you do?

- a. Reassign the woman engineer. After all, it is best not to make waves.
- b. Tell the Japanese engineer that he must either work with all the members of your team or leave your plant.
- c. Try to reason with the Japanese engineer, telling him that in your culture women are highly qualified and work side by side with men. If this doesn't work try persuading him through other members of his team or by contacting his supervisors in Japan and informing them of the problem.
- d. Your solution...

9. You work for the Internal Revenue Service. Your office has recently been conducting a routine industry-wide audit of several private firms located on the island. During the course of your work, you find out one of your co-workers has reached an agreement with one of the firms in the industry that is highly advantageous to that firm. (Probably your co-worker was bribed to make this settlement but you are not sure.) This firm has then told all the other firms in this industry of their settlement, and they are all demanding a comparable settlement. What should you do?

- a. Give in to the demand. First, your coworker has undermined your negotiating position so there is not much you can do. Second, should you try to strengthen your position by exposing your coworker to possible charges of misconduct this would

make your life very difficult. You are still relatively new and do not have a lot of seniority. You also have a family to support.

- b. Bring the matter to the attention of your supervisor. Seek her help and advice. After all, if you do nothing, you become a contributory part of the problem.
- c. First document your position that you are opposed to the settlement the firm is trying to impose on you. Send copies to your supervisor, the ombudsman, your coworker, and the firm in question. Then remain firm in your negotiation with the firm despite their cries of injustice.
- d. Your solution...

10. You work for a firm that provides consultation services for clients looking to identify and implement software systems to facilitate the services they provide to their customers. Your company has identified a system to help a client, a hardware store, better inventory its stock. To save the client money, your supervisor asks you to install the necessary software on the client's computers. However the license agreement that your company has with the company that provides this software does not allow you to do this. When you confront your supervisor with this, he says go ahead and do it anyway—nobody will know. What should you do?

- a. Do what your supervisor asks. But write a memo stating that you do this under protest. Make clear the legal implications of what you are being asked to do and send copies to your supervisor and his supervisor.
- b. Refuse to do so. If your supervisor persists, ask him to put his order in writing and in writing take responsibility for his decision. Since it is illegal, he will probably not call your bluff.
- c. Write a letter to the company that owns the software telling them that your company is routinely violating the licensing agreement.
- d. Ask for a meeting with a higher-level supervisor. This supervisor can then mediate between you and your supervisor.
- e. Your solution...

Note: All of these scenarios are based on events that actually occurred. Furthermore, the courses of action actually taken are included among the list of available alternatives of action. After you have worked through each scenario, compare your decision with those of people operating on the “front lines” on the [Actions Taken](#) page.