

Dilemma: Right vs. Right

Dilemma: Not a Bang—Just a Whimper. What’s Going On?

Larry was a young port engineer who worked energetically for his shipping company, overseeing repairs and related projects. He was proud when he was put in charge of a multi-million-dollar repair order for one of his company’s ships. The repairs were contracted out to a major shipyard, and everything went smoothly until the end of the project. When he was handed the bill, however, he realized it had been inflated by about one-third of total project costs.

Larry was shocked. He had never been confronted by such an apparently corrupt practice before. After delaying the “sign off” for a couple of days, he approached his boss, pointed out what was going on, and explained why he could not sign off. His boss asked for specifics, which he readily supplied.

A meeting was arranged between shipyard and shipping company officials, who went over the disputed items. They agreed that the shipping company was being over-billed by millions of dollars. To Larry’s surprise, there was little reaction from either side of the table. Nor was there any definitive, ethical stance from his company.

The meeting was adjourned until the next day, when shipyard officials offered to split the difference. Both parties turned to Larry for approval, who explained that he couldn’t sign off on the adjusted bill, either. Again, the meeting adjourned with no apparent reaction, and Larry left in a daze.

By the time of the third meeting, Larry was beginning to piece things together. Apparently his superiors respected his integrity. They were following orderly procedures to arrive at a final bill. But he couldn’t help noticing their lack of outrage and conviction. What would drive them to such a compromise? What would make such a fine company turn a blind eye to such practices?

Analysis

As Larry thought it over, he realized that there was more at stake here than a dispute over a bill. Good shipyards with skilled labor on hand were increasingly scarce, and Larry’s company was dependent on the few that remained. If his company took the shipyard to court, the shipyard might be prevented from further operation. What would Larry’s company do then? As Larry considered the larger picture, he began to understand that his own truth vs. loyalty dilemma was in fact a short term vs. long term dilemma for his bosses. Larry had to decide between signing off loyally on a bill he knew to be dishonest, or sticking up for the truth. Was it better to rid the industry of corrupt practices in the long term, even if meant that in the short term there were no good shipyards in operation? Or was it better to tolerate such practices now and ensure that ships could continue to be repaired well into the future?

Note: This and other dilemmas on this site come to you without their real-life resolutions. We encourage you to think for yourself about how you might resolve them, since the nature of each dilemma is highly individualistic. In sharing these dilemmas, we

do not endorse them in any way, but rather offer them for your consideration.

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