

Ethics and the Pursuit of a Good Night's Sleep

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In 1986, engineer Allan McDonald refused to okay the space shuttle *Challenger* launch. But he was overruled and the launch was approved. The shuttle exploded, killing all crew members onboard—and McDonald has spent much of the past 30 years talking with engineers and their bosses, including NSPE members, in an attempt to keep something similar from happening again.

But it *did* happen again 17 years later with the space shuttle *Columbia*, which disintegrated on re-entry because pieces of foam insulation from the external fuel tank struck the left wing of the orbiter on launch, damaging *Columbia's* heat shield. In 2003, the Columbia Accident Investigation Board saw strong parallels with the *Challenger* disaster and remarked insightfully about the loss of seven lives: “NASA’s organizational culture and structure had as much to do with this accident as the external tank foam. Organizational culture refers to the values, norms, beliefs, and practices that govern how an institution functions.”

One might have thought that the goal-driven NASA culture that gave rise to the *Challenger* disaster would have made a *Columbia* disaster impossible. But institutional cultures do not change of their own accord—and this is as true in finance (Wells Fargo) and pharmaceuticals (Mylan’s EpiPen pricing) as it is in the aerospace industry.

Employees of all disciplines and leadership levels at some time face situations that test their ethical convictions. Most people want to do the right thing, but they have conflicting pressures. Often these situations arise slowly and without much notice, though at other times they are sudden and dramatic.

What can individuals do to keep both their principles—and their careers? Are they powerless in a corporate environment in which ethics is not emphasized? Where

can one get moral encouragement to do the right thing, even if one’s job is on the line?

There are a number of important sources for such encouragement: one’s family, one’s church, one’s professional association (codes and oaths), and, often overlooked, the ethical support system provided by one’s educational institution.

McDonald suggests that such encouragement must come first and foremost from the corporate culture itself. And responsibility for establishing an ethical culture lies with leadership. But how can leaders institutionalize ethics? How many organizations provide comprehensive ethics education for employees?

In Minnesota, where we teach engineering and MBA students, all licensed professional engineers are required to take continuing education in ethics every two years. Does management take such continuing education seriously? And how many organizations encourage employees to identify and expose ethical problems to management and peers? How many organizations guarantee protection for those who do?

For workers in corporate environments where the culture is “go along to get along,” the remedy starts with the tone at the top. Our experience is that when employees speak up, they are sometimes penalized, but more often they are recognized for their principles and courage, and even promoted.

We have mentored graduating students, suggesting that when they are interviewing for a position in a company, they should also be evaluating the company for a fit with their own beliefs and convictions. Prospective employees can put companies on notice that, to get the talent they need, they must create a culture of ethics and trust. If they don’t, valued employees will find their way to organizations that do.

McDonald, who certainly worked in an ethically challenging environment, suggests that being able to sleep well at night might be more important than employment.

One of the bedrock questions is how do ordinary people (Wells Fargo employees told to set up fake accounts, for example) tackle the challenge that McDonald faced: If I speak up, I will lose my job and I may never work again, at least at my salary level and in my profession. How can people balance the often-competing interests of supporting their family and doing what they know is right?

How is your organization addressing this issue, and what are you personally doing about it?

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AT THE NSPE 2015 ANNUAL MEETING IN SEATTLE, AEROSPACE CONSULTANT AND AUTHOR ALLAN MCDONALD SHARED THE ETHICS LESSONS HE LEARNED AFTER THE 1986 SPACE SHUTTLE CHALLENGER DISASTER. MCDONALD REFUSED TO SIGN THE LAUNCH RECOMMENDATION FOR THE MISSION, BUT HE WAS OVERRULED.