Ethics

When to challenge your supervisor's decision

BY TOM O'DONNELL
Ethics Committee Member

This installment of the Ethics column offers advice based on the letters sent to the Ethics Committee. The writer's name has been kept anonymous to protect his or her identity.

Dear Ethics Advisor,

I am formerly an employee of a leading company in the manufacture and supply of industrial electronic components. I recently encountered a problem with the engineering manager with respect to the control software of one of our products. He told me, "What I say goes," and I replied, "No, if I disagree about what you're doing, I will speak up and explain myself. The best engineering decision is what goes."

I had discovered while analyzing the code to the control program after a former dispute that a mechanism in a new system configuration does not work properly in software. They need to replace code for several machines in the field. I defined the problem explicitly. After uncovering this grave error, I was fired soon after for insubordinance.

I am not the only one to have encountered a problem with this manager. I had learned after being there for a little over a month that many people who worked for this manager have had problems with him. Some had left the company because of this.

In terms of ethics, when is it appropriate to disagree with your managerial staff and when is it insubordination? Especially when crucial engineering decisions are at stake. I am an engineer with integrity and will not listen to my manager simply because he says so. It must be the best engineering decision. I feel I should take legal recourse in this matter. I was hired to be an engineer, not a numb servant.

Please respond. Your advice is extremely important to me. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Engineer with Integrity

Dear Engineer with Integrity,

Your manager telling you "What I say goes" is not an effective way to inspire his employees to do the best job they can. A good manager encourages his workers to speak up and explain themselves if there is disagreement.

Having said that, your assertion that the "best engineering decision is what goes," is not always the case. Frequently there are other factors involved in making decisions (e.g., economics or scheduling). You may not be aware of all the factors involved in a decision.

As the responsible party, your manager will receive the blame or the glory based on the success of a project. If he makes a poor decision he will pay the price.

You ask, "When is it appropriate to disagree with your managerial staff and when is it insubordination?" When the health or well being of any individual or the public at large is at stake, you have an obligation to disagree. Is that the case here?

If it isn't, let your boss know your feelings in a tactful way. Document it. If it is important, let his boss know you had a disagreement over the decision. If you still get no satisfaction, let more people know. This serves to protect you and, if you are correct about the quality of the decision, will alert others to it.

If the situation goes nowhere, let it go. When the health or well being of any individual is not at stake, it is probably not worth alienating your boss to the point of being fired for insubordination. Bad engineering decisions are made all the time. And you can maintain your integrity in the face of them. I'd also consider seeking employment elsewhere.

If, on the other hand, the welfare of an individual or the public at large is at stake and you need to be more proactive, consider contacting an ethics support group such as the On Line Ethics Organization "http://onlineethics.org/". They may be able to help you further.

Ethics Advisor