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The engineer and the conflict of values

During the past few months, Québec engineers have been rocked by the number of news stories reporting irregularities in the construction industry. When reprehensible engineers make wrong choices and do not live up to professional expectations, their colleagues are all concerned. If you were faced with a dilemma involving your professional values, would you be able to resolve this inner turmoil?

A DEMANDING EXPERIENCE...

Situations of conflicting values have paved the road to riches for novelists and filmmakers alike: at the heart of the story, the protagonist is torn between two scenarios and must choose the right one. This is the recipe to *Avatar's* success, to name but the most recent and flamboyant example. For the moviegoer, making the right choice can seem obvious but in real life, that's a completely different story!

Each person has his or her own values. What are yours? Love, family, friendship? Justice, loyalty, respect? Work, progress, the environment? Other than one's personal values, there are those professional values brought forth by the Order and that all engineers are called upon to make their own: **competence, a sense of ethics, responsibility and social commitment** *.

Far from being futile, values move us to act one way or another. They guide us and when problems arise, they help us determine the proper course of action. It is through our actions that we demonstrate which values truly matter to us. What are we prepared to do in order to respect a value that is important to us? This is but one of the many questions that come to mind when a situation involving conflicting values arises.

WHEN OUR VALUES CLASH

Here is a fictitious case: an employer assigns a mandate to an engineer, but does not give him enough time or money to carry out all of the research and analyses required to ensure the safety of those who will use the product. This poses a problem for the engineer. He will have to sign documents certifying that the work is of good quality without being convinced of such quality. What to do?

In this example, the engineer knows that if he complies with his employer's demand, he will be violating the Code of ethics of engineers and would be disregarding the public's protection. He is also going through an inner conflict where values he holds dear clash and collide. In addition to wanting to respect his professional values, this engineer may value loyalty toward his employer, team spirit or his family's security.

But what would happen if he complained to his employer or if he exposed these practices to a superior: would he and his team be faced with negative repercussions? Would he risk losing his job, his family having to suffer the consequences of unemployment?

If he were to carry out the mandate as required by his employer, would he not risk his reputation as well as that of his

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employer once the irregularities were to come to light, as they ultimately would?

This engineer no doubt feels trapped. This conflict of values raises practical issues that leave him feeling torn and from which he cannot escape. Let us not forget that his personal values are a part of him and his identity. These considerations all explain why a conflict of values is so often difficult to go through and so hard to solve.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Engineers are not all liable to experience a situation of conflicting values during their careers. However, you will greatly benefit from knowing what to do should such a situation arise.

First of all, and contrary to technical issues relating to engineering, there is no algorithm or sure-fire formula that can solve a conflict of values. Each case is unique and the method one should use to face it requires an in-depth analysis of the situation. This judgment call takes for granted that one is able to see and understand what is going on. Thus, it is imperative that one remains calm.

The last comment may seem straightforward, even simplistic, but when one's employment, self-image or professional future, or even the lives or health of others are at stake, calm is not always that easy to attain or to maintain!

In order to understand a situation, we must ask ourselves the right questions. What are the reasons behind the situation? What are the interests at hand and who are the people involved? What general values are being conflicted? Which values of mine are being threatened by the situation? What should I do and more importantly, why should I do it?

In a situation of conflicting values, it is crucial that we understand the reasons why we are moved to make one decision over another: do I want to serve my personal interests without considering those of others? An ill-resolved conflict may have important consequences and could lead to long-lasting regrets. That is why we must also consider the consequences of each possible choice.

GETTING THE OTHER'S POINT OF VUE

The engineer faced with conflicting values will also want to consider society's expectations as far as he or she is concerned, as a professional. In doing so, he or she may refer to the normative framework and the rules that govern the situation, such as the Code of ethics, his or her employment contract and, if necessary, the state of the law relating to the matter at hand. For example, jurisprudence clearly states that, for professionals, loyalty towards the profession outweighs loyalty towards one's employer.

Gathering information is paramount. It allows us to cover the entire issue and give ourselves a solid foundation on which to base our decision.

In this endeavour, it is also crucial to turn to one or more people whom we trust. A fellow Ordre member, a colleague, a lawyer or a representative of the Ordre: it is important to find someone to talk to and who can validate our understanding of the situation as well as the possible options. Did we understand the situation correctly? Did we analyze everything? On this topic, it is important to know that the Ordre des ingénieurs can provide support, such as help in interpreting laws and regulations relating to the practice of engineering.

KNOWING ONE'S ROLE

It bears reminding that engineers must maintain a calm composure in order to go through such a situation. This is particularly true in urgent matters that require a quick response. We should add that engineers must pay great attention to the limitations of their role. What is the first thing we must do? Can the problem be solved internally? Would it be better to solve the problem alone or with others? Should we take the matter to our immediate supervisor, to a superior, to the media?

It is useless to play Don Quixote. The manner in which we will resolve the situation at the heart of the conflict is as important as the questions that allow us to understand it. Each decision will entail consequences that will be more or less important. The main thing is to respect the profession's values and ethics, limit negative repercussions and... preserve our self-esteem.

* To know more about the engineer's values, please refer to the article entitled "In today's context, how do the values of our profession fit into our everyday lives", published in the April edition of *PLAN*