

8.8: Exercises

Ethical Dilemma

How far would you go to find out who is talking to whom? (Bergstein, 2006; Allison, 2006; Fried, 2006))

In 2006, Hewlett-Packard Development Company LP became embroiled in a controversy over methods used to investigate media leaks from its board. HP Chairperson Patricia Dunn could have simply asked the directors who was the source cited in the story, sought an apology, and gone from there. With some direct face-to-face communication, the story would likely have ended quickly. It did not. “Not only did investigators impersonate board members, employees and journalists to obtain their phone records, but according to multiple reports, they also surveilled an HP director and a reporter for CNet Networks Inc. They sent monitoring spyware in an e-mail to that reporter by concocting a phony tip. They even snooped on the phone records of former CEO and Chairperson Carly Fiorina, who had launched the quest to identify media sources in the first place.” The situation continued to escalate. For example, the *New York Times* reported that HP consultants even considered planting clerical or custodial workers at CNet and the *Wall Street Journal* to learn who was leaking information to them. Following this, Patricia Dunn, as well as three executives, left the company. A congressional hearing and several federal investigations later, executives were charged with felonies, and HP paid \$14.5 million to settle civil charges related to the scandal. HP is not the only company to use such methods; recent admissions by the investigation firms involved suggest that the use of ethically questionable investigative tactics by large companies is quite common. “It betrays a type of corporate culture that is so self-obsessed, (that) really considers itself not only above the law, but above, I think, ethical decency, that you have to ask yourself, where did the shame come in?” said Charles King, an analyst with Pund-IT Inc.

Consider this situation from a multiple stakeholder perspective. Imagine you are...

- a CEO faced with leaks regarding your strategic vision. What would you do to determine who was sharing the information? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches?
- a shareholder with HP stock. What would you want to see done to protect your investment in the company?
- a board member who was spied upon. What would your reaction be to learning that you were investigated?
- an investigator hired by HP. What role do you have to uphold ethical standards?

As several observers have noted, HP spent a lot of time establishing whether or not their activities were technically legal but little time considering whether or not their actions were ethical.

Group Exercise

You Know What I Mean, Right?

Purpose

This exercise illustrates how words we commonly take for granted are not universal in their meaning.

Time

Approximately 20 minutes.

1. Write down the number that comes to mind for each of the following questions. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers—just go with your first response. Do not discuss your answers with anyone in the class until instructed to do so.
 - My neighbor just bought an expensive car. How much did it cost? _____
 - Several people were in line for the movie. How many people were in line? _____
 - The ballot measure was approved overwhelmingly. What percentage of votes did the measure receive? _____
 - My boss is an older man. How old is he? _____
 - I recently saw an article in the paper. How long ago did I see it? _____
2. Your instructor will summarize the responses from the class.
3. Discuss the following questions (either as a class or in small groups).
 - Do you agree that words mean different things to different people?
 - How large was the range of responses for each of the questions? Why was this?
 - Did this surprise you? Why or why not?

What can you apply from this exercise to make you a better communicator?

References

Allison, K. (2006, September 30). Spy methods used in other companies. Retrieved July 1, 2008, from *FT.com*: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15067438/>.

Bergstein, B. (2006, September 20). HP spy scandal hits new weirdness level. Retrieved July 1, 2008, from the *BusinessWeek.com* Web site: <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/tech/D8K8QTHO0.htm?chan=search>.

Fried, I. (2006, December 7). HP settles with California in spy scandal. Retrieved July 1, 2008, from *cNET news.com*: http://www.news.com/HP-settles-with-California-in-spy-scandal/2100-1014_3-6141814.html.

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