



Reasonable Voice

The Best Right Decision

A few years ago, I was contacted by a business owner whose customer had suffered a sudden, tragic loss. A fire and explosion had occurred at the customer's home, and a young child was killed during the fire.

Although the authorities did not immediately suggest the cause of the fire was in any way related to my client's product or service, he felt tremendous pressure to do something... in fact, anything. Should he publicly disclose that this customer was his customer? He was torn between showing tangible, outward support for the customer's family and exposing himself to even the slightest perception of blame or liability for something which may or may not have had anything to do with a product he sold.

Although he cooperated fully with fire investigators, his company name was never mentioned in the news or discussed outside of the investigation. He was deeply concerned for the family involved, but also for the responsibility he had to his own family, employees, other customers, and business reputation.

Throughout this scenario, my role was to work with the client and his attorney to determine what to say about this situation, if anything. We carefully prepared a series of "holding statements" which were used internally and were ready only if needed for external use, including with the news media. However, no news inquiries were made, and no public discussion ever occurred. We made no public statements.

It took several weeks, but investigators ultimately determined that the company's product and workmanship had nothing to do with the fire and explosion. And in this instance, the owner's quiet suffering and low profile helped to protect his company's reputation. He certainly didn't feel any better about the tragic incident which resulted in the loss of life and property, but he did feel he had made the best decision under the circumstances.

Did we make the right decision?

When faced with difficult or sensitive decisions, our minds can get clouded by the stress and uncertainty of the emotional moment. We often act impulsively without thinking the situation through completely... or suffer from "paralysis by analysis" as we look for the perfect answer, which seldom exists.

An ethical business owner or leader doesn't have to disclose every detail of every situation in order to do the right thing, but they should use a systematic process that takes them beyond their own knee-jerk reaction to ensure they make the best right choice. This can involve a several step assessment of the potential consequences which may result from one course of action versus another for the greatest good of the greatest number -- or determining a decision simply out of a sense of duty; often dictated by the special obligations they have through the relationships, actions, or roles they occupy in their organizations or society.

Applying a thoughtful business ethics approach involves systematic thinking that moves us beyond those impulsive reactions to include careful deliberation of the situation at hand.

It's not easy, but it can help us make the best right decision.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Meath". The signature is stylized and fluid.

Michael Meath
February 2016