

# Ethics at Work

By Jane McCahon

Imagine you are sitting in your boss's office at the Widget Corp. when your assistant, Maria — who has been known to overreact — sticks her head in and says, "Something pretty strange just happened that you need to know about." You exchange looks with your boss and head back to your office. Maria points to a fax on your desk and tells you that she just received a panicked call from the person who sent it. "She told me that it was transmitted by mistake," said Maria, and to "pleeease — destroy it immediately!"

OK, let's back up a little with some background on this scenario. Your company has put out a request for proposal to solicit bids for an upcoming project. You are aware that a number of companies, including the incumbent firm, Acme, Inc., are planning to respond to the RFP. How should you proceed?

The above is a scenario that, in various permutations, could occur at your company. What ethics would apply to resolving this situation?

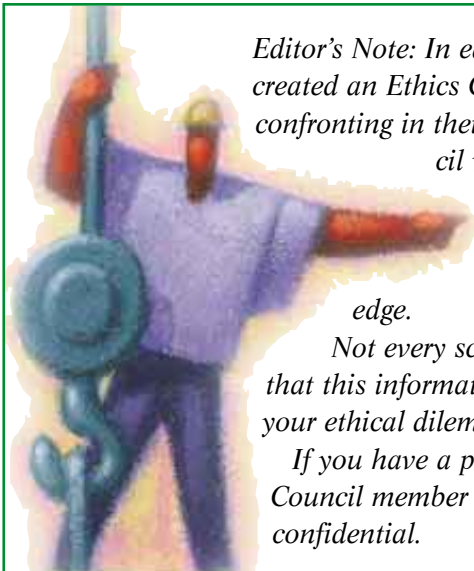
The first question you should ask yourself is: Should I even look at the fax? Under the circumstances, it seems you should find out what was causing the panic call from the sender. How could you even begin to justify tearing it up without reading it when you know it may

be problematic? After all, if you do read it and it doesn't concern you or your company, it can then be tossed.

So you read the fax and see that it contains a proposal from the Doodad Corp., a company competing for the project. Now here's the problem: The sender of the fax was Acme, Inc., the incumbent firm, which is also competing for this project.

How in the world did Acme obtain a copy of Doodad's proposal? Again you ask yourself whether to ignore the situation. But your years of business experience, as well as your stomach, won't allow you to do this — it just isn't right. So you call your contact at Acme and ask point-blank, "What is going on here? How did you get Doodad's proposal?" Her answer is, "We have our ways — this is a very competitive business, you know. Everybody does this."

This is not exactly the answer you were looking for. So, what to do now? Should you accept the fact that this may be a common business practice in some industries? Maybe you should wait to see how the bidding process works out and then deal with the problem. Or should you inform Doodad Corp. that its proposal has been "stolen"? There are a lot of options to consider, with many possible repercussions.



*Editor's Note: In early 2002, at the height of corporate scandals, the NIRI board of directors created an Ethics Council to respond to problematic issues that our membership might be confronting in their jobs. In this new bimonthly column, Ethics at Work, members of the council will present a case and solve it in the most ethical manner they know. All the members — Chair Jane McCahon, Tim Croasdaile, David Erickson, Jay Gould, Len Griehs and Karen Warren — are senior practitioners with a combined 130 years of experience. That's a lot of wisdom and a lot of knowledge.*

*Not every scenario will match a particular situation in your company, but rest assured that this information will have many practical applications and just might help you resolve your ethical dilemma.*

*If you have a problem that would benefit from their counsel, please contact any Ethics Council member or write to me at [irupdate@NIRI.org](mailto:irupdate@NIRI.org). All communication will be kept confidential.*

At the end of the day, you need to ask yourself — as you do with all ethical dilemmas — what can I live with? If *The Wall Street Journal* wrote about this situation, how would I want to be portrayed, and how would I want to see my company treated? Would I be embarrassed or proud of my role? How will my company and its reputation fare from the decisions I make now?

Your next step is a good one. Since you were with your boss when Maria first told you of the situation, and you know he'll ask about it, tell him what happened. Sharing an ethical dilemma with someone you respect and trust can help you wade through your options. He frowns and asks you what you think happened. At that point, you should tell him of your suspicions — and they are not very attractive. You think it is actually a problem from within the company — that the person in charge of managing the bid process, Hal Smith, might have passed Doodad's bid along to Acme.

Calls are then made to the president of Widget, Inc. to inform her that the integrity of the bidding process has been breached, and to Doodad alerting the company to what has happened. You also advise Acme that the firm

is now excluded from bidding on this project and any future projects until you receive assurances from management that what has happened here is not representative of its business practices.

Lo and behold, the next day Hal Smith resigns to “pursue other interests” and all of Acme's relationships with your company are terminated. Yikes! Is this what you meant to put in motion?

Yes, it is. At the end of the day, your reputation — and that of your company — reflects the reputations of all the companies with whom you do business, and that matters a great deal. It makes you respect the people you work with and vice versa. And it lets you sleep peacefully at night.

Have you experienced a similar situation at work? What did you do? What decisions might you have made differently? Let us hear from you! [IRU](#)

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