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Case Study

The Ethical Choice: Confronting Ethical Dilemmas with Industry Participants in a Curriculum

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Abstract

This hypothetical teaching case presents learners with two ethical dilemmas faced in an agricultural sales course. The primary dilemma consists of a salesman suggesting to a student they fabricate a ride-along experience they were to complete together. A second dilemma addresses a sales representative condoning the use of “little white lies” to customers and others as part of the sales process. The case study is designed to facilitate consideration of ethical dilemmas through context-specific decision making. It allows students the opportunity to investigate choices by considering a range of factors not limited to standards of conduct and personal values. Questions help guide use of the case, and an instructor’s note is available.

1 Introduction

Professor Edwards felt a knot in her stomach as she contemplated before responding to a student’s email. The student, John, was dissatisfied with his grade on a paper. His email implied he might get special consideration for his integrity which, he noted, was better than that of the industry professional he had been assigned to shadow on sales calls in the field for a day. The paper John referred to represents the report associated with one of the highlights of Dr. Edward’s agricultural sales course. Students spend a day with a sales professional making calls on customers. They interpret what they observed within the context of the terminology and methods covered in the semester-long course in a written report (paper).

Dr. Edwards has been teaching the course at a midwestern land-grant university for nearly twenty years. The upper-level class is popular and often recommended by student advisors, perhaps because over half the college’s graduates start their careers in sales or in a position that regularly employs sales techniques. Dr. Edwards is a popular teacher known for her accessibility. She advises two student organizations and makes it a point to regularly participate in student-, alumni-, and industry-centered events. She is considered fair and especially empathetic to the unique demands on the lives of her students. Class size is generally between 80 and 100 students.

The case is designed to facilitate consideration of context-specific ethical dilemmas. Learning objectives are to be able to: (1) list people and entities affected by the case; (2) identify how they might be affected by the scenario and its potential outcomes; (3) identify multiple alternatives for resolution; (4) articulate advantages and disadvantage of each alternative; and (5) make and justify a resolution. The case is hypothetical.

2 Background

Details are provided about the class and focus on the job shadow assignment and incorporation of discussion about ethics in the classroom.

2.1 The Assignment

Approximately 15 percent of the course grade is assigned to a job shadow assignment. The first week of class students are provided with a list of sales professionals. Information provided about the sales professional and their firm is included to help students identify those professionals working in a field of interest to them (e.g., seed, machinery, and implements) and facilitates the choice of a professional that works in or around an area that is convenient to the student. All the sales professionals on the list have either participated in the activity in a previous year and indicated they would desire to participate again; or, after reading information about the motivation behind and details of the assignment, have readily agreed to participate.

In the initial greeting email to sales professionals, Dr. Edwards encourages the sales professionals to feel free to decline if they do not have time, do not prefer to participate, or are not able to participate. Students are also free to choose a professional they know (of) who is not on the list and contact them directly once their choice has been approved by the instructor.

Students are asked to contact their professional early in the term to schedule a day to ride along on sales calls. Students generally meet their sales professional early in the day and accompany them while they call on multiple farm or firm customers. The only absolute requirement for the assignment is that the student shadow the professional on a day that the sales professional will be calling on multiple customers. This is very occasionally relaxed when the professional plans to otherwise interact with customers (e.g., when they are holding a customer appreciation dinner with an informal presentation thereafter and plan to visit with individual customers throughout the evening). When scheduling the ride along proves difficult, every attempt is made to reassign the student. In the rare cases when the student encounters a same-day surprise that the sales professional does not plan to work directly with individual customers that day, Dr. Edwards encourages and gives the student the option to ride with another professional, but allows them to write their report based on the day they spent with the original salesperson, if time constraints preclude this option. The paper is due late in the term to facilitate scheduling and, when necessary, rescheduling, the ride along.

2.1.1 Objectives

The stated objectives of the assignment, as articulated to the student, are to:

- Learn more about what a salesperson does during a typical day. Find out firsthand what it is like to be a salesperson, so that you can make a more informed career choice.
- Observe how a salesperson in your area of professional interest works with customers.
- Learn how the concepts and techniques that you study in class are applied to professionals in the field.
- Learn how to handle yourself as a professional in a professional environment. Arranging for your day with the salesperson, completing it, and writing the report will provide you with an opportunity to sharpen your communication skills, as well as get a taste of the professional environment.
- To make contacts in your area of professional interest.

2.1.2 Requirements

A guide is distributed to students at the beginning of the term that provides details of the required written report, an evaluation sheet the sales professional is asked to complete about the student, and a request to the sales professional to indicate interest in participating in future years. Instructions provided to the student are summarized here. The statements that are in bold here are also highlighted in bold in the instructions to the students.

- Identify your professional salesperson and have your choice approved by your instructor. **Note that you are responsible for making sure that your salesperson sells directly to customers in the field on the day of your shadow.** [The instructions go on to indicate what doesn't work well such as nondirect selling situations and retail store sales.]
- **Contact your sales professional, being sure that the salesperson understands that you need to see him/her make calls in his/her territory.**
- Grading for the written report will be based on the following sections: background of the salesperson and their firm; summary of the day; evaluation of the sales process and customer relationship; and evaluation of the project and the salesperson's fit for the project.

Students are instructed to focus on only one sales call for the evaluation of the sales process and customer relationship section of the report. This section is the most important, and they are told it should comprise much of the written report. Details and examples are provided about what specifically to include (e.g., salesperson preparation, opening techniques employed, the presentation and handling objections methods used, closing, and follow-up). The grading rubric for this and the rest of the assignment is clearly identified. A paragraph beginning with **Important!** indicates that the noted checklist of topics will be used to assign their grade and that, while not every sales call progresses formally through all the identified steps of the sales process, the salesperson will have done some (or no) preparation, attempted to establish rapport, met (or not met) his/her objective, closed the call, and so on. Students are to write about how the salesperson employs the strategic sales process, how he/she adapts it to his/her special needs and situation, and its effectiveness. They are encouraged to use terms and processes covered in class and in their textbook.

2.2 Ethics Presentation

Early in the term, Dr. Edwards offers a short presentation on ethics. The textbook adopted devotes considerable attention to ethics in the field of sales, and Dr. Edwards shares personal experiences. She is clear that ethics are not black and white, and reveals that sales professionals who practice unethical behavior can be successful. She defines ethical behavior as “doing the right thing” and focuses a bit on “the little white lie.”

To emphasize where the little white lie can go wrong, she tells them her “brown suit story.” It is a long-drawn-out tale about her decade-long love affair with a brown suit because one of her peers, who could evidently think of nothing else to say about her presentation, said they liked her suit and that it made her look professional. The truth was that they only offered this faux compliment to increase her confidence in presenting. It was a decade later when she learned her peers considered her suit frumpy and inappropriate in a professional environment. She has, at times, reflected on where she could be now in life if she had instead focused her efforts during the subsequent decade on finding a professional look.

Dr. Edwards tells students this story because they will learn from the actions and words of some sales professionals (including in her classroom) that little white lies are okay. In many cases, the teller of the lie seems to believe it is justified because, for example, there is no good way around it or they don't believe in what they were supposed to do but, rather than argue the point, they simply lie about having done it. For example, there is the representative that cites his use of nonexistent confidentiality issues to say no to the manufacturer representative that wants to ride along with him for a few days. He just doesn't like the man. He shares this story with the class from time to time; but the rest of his information and the fact that animal health representative contacts for the many animal science students are difficult to come by, result in him being invited back year after year. And, like the salesperson who is central to our case story, he is a strong university supporter and an excellent community member. In this case, he is also a good friend to Dr. Edwards.

Dr. Edwards notes during her ethics mini presentation for the first time, and repeats several times throughout the term, that students should report any situation that they are concerned might be unethical.

Associated with the class, unless it involves her own behavior, Dr. Edwards offers herself as the appropriate contact.

3 The Ethical Situation

It was an email not unlike others received from students arguing for a better grade, but this one added an accusation against a sales professional.

3.1 The Email

During finals week, Dr. Edwards received the email from John, a student in her agricultural sales course. He communicated his displeasure with the application of the grading rubric to his submitted assignment.

Dr. Edwards: You were right. The criteria for grading was laid out at one point of the many-page description of the assignment. However, I believe the actual ordering process happens largely during the fall of the year, not during the spring when the class is offered. Perhaps I completely misunderstood the purpose of the activity. I thought it was to observe what a salesperson does so that we could have a better idea of whether it is something we would like to do. Looking at the grade I received on the assignment, I can only guess that you wanted something else. Unfortunately, if I am right about what you were looking for, I couldn't deliver it unless I had a staged experience. I am kind of wishing I would have taken [sales professional] up on the offer to sit down and make up a sales experience day rather than riding along. I am disappointed that you felt my paper and real experience with the salesperson was only worth a 72%. Sincerely, John

Because of the many activities and obligations related to his position in a campus organization, John had missed an unusually large number of classes. In later discussions, he indicated he was not in class on the day the salesperson shadow activity and assignment were covered in-depth. Dr. Edwards could also not be sure if John was present during her repeated references to the situation wherein a salesperson allegedly suggested to the student shadowing them (who was a former intern with the company) that they simply fabricate the shadow day experience and base the paper on a previous experience, because they could not find a mutually acceptable day to spend together. This latter situation was relayed to Dr. Edwards by a third party (another former student) who named the sales professional as the same one implicated in our case. That is, the sales professional had evidently done this before, and the students had been warned that, although it should not occur, for whatever reason, it may. Dr. Edwards stresses that sometimes good people make poor decisions. She also offers help in finding another salesperson should this type of situation arise and stresses that this will be done without the sales professional knowing why the student was reassigned.

John's email was like a blow to the gut, not so much because it reflected an unhappy student, but because it seemed to include a second allegation against one of her most active and motivated professional participants. After the first allegation, Dr. Edwards simply hoped it would not occur again if it had in fact occurred at all. The second allegation appeared to be a confirmation of a pattern. And, it did not seem something a student would make up; almost certainly not something two independent students would make up.

Dr. Edwards followed up with John by telephone. He reiterated that he did not believe the paper's instructions were very clear and his belief that he did the right thing by reporting on what he did rather than on what he was assigned to do. Dr. Edwards reviewed with John the instructions and, when they concluded their conversation, John seemed to be somewhat more accepting about the clarity of the assignment and that he might have written about his experience in a more grading rubric-friendly manner.

Dr. Edward's specific concern was John alluding to a proposition by his salesperson to fabricate the sales experience. In the follow-up phone call, John confirmed that the salesman had shared with him his belief that this assignment would not be that useful since the student was a prior intern, and that the student was welcome to fabricate a day and the associated visit on which the bulk of the report is based. Permission to create an experience would be necessary because the students (and the sales professionals, especially this one who has participated for several years with multiple students) are well-aware that a copy of the student's paper is sent to the salesperson with her thanks to them.

3.2 The Salesman

The salesman in question has had an important role in the class. He is an extraordinary individual and gives a great deal to the class and the department. He is a graduate of the department in which the class is taught and an active alumnus. This salesman has participated in the “big three” events since the agricultural sales course was initiated two decades prior to this incident. That is, he speaks to the class in the classroom, takes students (normally two or three) for the shadow of a salesperson assignment, and participates in the cumulating experience for the students, the day they sell their chosen products to a professional acting as a customer. He contacts Dr. Edwards before the term to let her know he is ready to go, rather than the more traditional request from the instructor first.

His time in the classroom with the students is very useful, and the students like and respect him. He is incredible as a customer for the students in their final selling project. Dr. Edwards tells the sales professionals a week or so in advance who will be selling to them and what product they will be selling. When the night comes, it is clear this sales professional has done his homework. For example, if one of his students is selling an animal health care product, this professional has the label for and pricing of this product so he can ask the right questions and present appropriate objections for the student to handle. He is so good and well prepared that Dr. Edwards sometimes assigns him students selling a product (such as a wine press), which do not fit readily within the more producer-oriented product groups with which most of the sales professionals are acquainted.

In short, the sales professional cares about the students, the university, and developing great young professionals. He goes the extra mile. For example, and somewhat ironically, when Dr. Edwards sent a general email to local sales professionals asking them what sort of training they receive in ethics and what resources they have available, he not only responded to her direct questions (one of only a handful of sales professionals to do so among dozens queried), but also suggested Dr. Edwards do more work in training students about ethics, and give them practice with actual situations faced by sales professionals.

4 Resolution

Although Dr. Edwards was disappointed to learn of the situation, she was glad it was brought to her attention, and she thanked John for being forthcoming. She filed away the incident, thinking through a resolution for another time. She had six months to decide, at which time she would be contacting sales professionals to participate for the following year. Time passes quickly and she is now preparing for the class this spring, including scheduling and contacting sales professionals about who will participate and how they will participate. She is no closer to a resolution than when she hung up the phone after speaking with John.

5 Questions

The following questions will guide consideration of the ethical dilemmas faced in the case study.

1. Is there an ethical dilemma in this case on which a decision must be made? Why does the decision matter (i.e., why is an action necessary)? Is there more than one ethical choice for consideration by the instructor?
2. What might have motivated the sales professional to encourage misrepresenting an activity?
3. What are the options available to the instructor?
4. What are the considerations associated with each? What are the advantages and disadvantages? What are the risks (e.g., what could go wrong)?
5. What should the instructor do?
6. What alternatives were available to John? Did he make the right choice? Did he make the best choice?

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