

'Just say when': ethics series

By: Rich Burgess

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Marcus is a licensed engineer who owns a small civil engineering firm specializing in bridge design. He has earned a reputation as both a highly competent engineer and a friendly boss.

No one knows this better than Simon, who has worked side by side with Marcus for 12 years now. During this time, the two have developed a close friendship. Simon has known Marcus to be an even-tempered man who places an emphasis on both innovation and precision in his work.

The firm has a peer-review process whereby calculations are checked by another engineer; Simon typically checks Marcus' work. Historically, Marcus' calculations have been right on target. Recently, however, Simon has noticed an increase in errors; some of them significant.

When Simon brought these errors to Marcus' attention, the latter chuckled, mumbled something about needing to stop listening to baseball games while working and promised to make the appropriate corrections. Marcus has been asking Simon to double-check his work less often these days. Simon is concerned by this.

Simon knows Marcus is going through a profound personal struggle right now. Marcus' marriage of 20 years is coming to an abrupt end. Caught unawares by all this, Marcus has been taking the situation very hard.

Simon is convinced Marcus has been distracted at work by his marital woes. Several engineers at the firm have offered to take on some of Marcus' workload to help relieve the stress he is experiencing. Marcus curtly thanked them, but declined the offer.

Because of their close personal relationship, Simon decides he is the best candidate to have a frank conversation with Marcus. Simon takes Marcus out to lunch and expresses his concern that Marcus' personal life is affecting his professional life.

Simon believes Marcus' errors will impact the safety of the designs submitted by the firm. This could, in turn, have grave consequences for both the public and the firm. Simon tells Marcus all of this.

Normally receptive to honest criticism, Marcus looks on the verge of exploding. In a strong voice, Marcus begins to say "Look...", but then he takes a deep breath and says, "Simon, you are right. In the past, I have been distracted and made some mistakes. You have been patient with me, and I really appreciate that on a personal and professional level. I will admit that in the beginning I was in a state of shock, but I have accepted that this divorce is happening."

Marcus goes on to state, "I need to work right now; it is all I have. Please continue to be patient

with me. I am confident I can handle what is on my plate. You know me; nothing is more important than the quality and safety of the work we do. Besides, I am very excited about our newest contract with the city. The deck for this new bridge I am working on is really going to require an innovative approach. Working on this project is going to make me push the limits of my design experience and knowledge; I am looking forward to it."

The rest of the conversation centers on the new project and Marcus' ideas for the bridge deck.

Reflecting on their meeting later that night, Simon believes Marcus is being unrealistic about the challenges that await him regarding the divorce process. Simon only sees things becoming more painful for Marcus at home and thus more stressful at work.

This would create even more favorable conditions for design errors on Marcus' part. Simon's primary concern is that if Marcus continues in his compromised condition, the safety of the public will be at risk. Simon also worries about the firm itself. A serious failure on a project irreparably would damage the reputation of the company.

What should Simon do?