Morals for your story

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Dilemma

I work for a company whose clients are property owners. It is my job to advise our clients about their options regarding property damage claims and their potential to recover any damages as a result of poor building, soil damage, or other factors. I often find myself choosing certain points to emphasize, based on what the client wants to hear, regardless of whether or not the points I emphasize are the most relevant to the situation. Since I work so closely with these clients, I find that omitting or deemphasizing the negative is better than upsetting them about the unknown. It also helps me keep a better working relationship with the client. Is this ethical behaviour?

-- Little Gray Lies

Responses

I think using a utilitarian point of view would be best. By not emphasizing the negative aspects, both you and the client remain happy. You are doing your job by reporting the property damage while also being able to gain trust and build strong relationships with your clients. Since you are not lying, you are not doing anything unethical. And utilitarianism promotes the greater good (happiness) for the greater number, which you seem to be achieving.

--Elisa Mullikin

Not telling the entire truth is still a lie. Omitting any potentially relevant information is still a lie and is, therefore, unethical. Consider the NSPE Code of Ethics for Engineers. It states: "Engineers, in the fulfillment of their professional duties, shall avoid deceptive acts." Leaving out part of the truth is always meant to deceive, whatever the motive. The entire truth should be told to avoid "deceptive acts." Also, the property owner has a right to know if something is wrong with his or her land. As for the information that is not pertinent to the situation, it is up to your judgment and conviction in deciding to tell or not to tell. If the information is not related to the situation but you still feel the owner should rightfully know, then you should tell them.

--Matthew Glazier

It is important to have a good relationship with your clients, but being upfront and honest with them will gain their trust and respect. Aristotle believed that true happiness is derived from being honest for reasons other than personal gain. But, according to Aristotle, you must find the mean between extremes, meaning that you should not lie or confess things that are not necessary. Just be honest about factors that pertain to your clients and their claims, and they will respect you. So, you aren't completely out of line, but in order to determine if your actions are ethical you must analyze your motives.

--Dakota Mitchell

Maybe you should tell your clients in a subtle way. I suggest telling them all of the great things about the property while including little sandwiches of negatives. By sandwiches I mean: tell them a great thing, then the negative, then how the negative could be positive. For example, "Your trees are very healthy. I don't see too many pine beetles. And with high bear population, you won't have to worry about rodents."

--Kim Lamphere

In this case, it sounds to me as if your behaviour is unethical by the standards of virtue ethics. Utilitarianism could see your handling of information as ethical because it creates the most happiness. Not emphasizing certain points to your clients makes them happy. This, in turn, makes a better relationship between you, which increases your happiness, as well. Others in your company will also be happy when it is seen that the clients are happy and that business will likely increase as a result.

When looking at Kantian ethics actions are considered moral that are respectful of human dignity and that are universalizable. From what I can see, you are not necessarily lying to your clients so you are respecting their dignity as rational beings. It also seems feasible to universalize the practice of telling people some bad news while emphasizing the good news.

Virtue ethics, on the other hand, determines morality based on how a person lives. One must live virtuously in order to be moral. One way to do this is to fulfill your telos, which is what you as a human being are meant to do in order to complete your purpose as a human and as an individual with a particular set of skills, gifts, and responsibilities. Your job is to advise your clients on any property damages whether good or bad no matter how a relationship with a client may be impacted. Therefore, my advice to you is to tell your clients about any property damage in order to live most virtuously.

--Chris Asmussen

Next Week's Dilemma

My friend was recently offered a job in a new department at our company. I was actually the one who told him about the new opportunity. Recently, however, I've heard from a reliable source that this new department is not expected to survive, that it may be a holding tank for people the company wants to get rid of.

I don't want my friend to lose his job. I've told him he should find out more about the new job and make sure it seems sound, but he seems content to believe that it is the best thing ever. I don't want to tell him exactly what I've heard and from whom. My friend has a big mouth and I don't want it to be known that I
have leaked private information.

What should I do? Do I have ethical obligations to my company? To my friend?

--Under the Weight of Knowledge