

# Ethical dilemmas in the insider



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The movie *The Insider* is based on real-life events from the mid-nineties. Jeffrey Wigand was vice president of research at Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corporation, but was unsatisfied with the direction that the company was heading. He was fired when he started to vocalize concerns about just how dangerous cigarettes actually were and about the fact that the company was adding chemicals that made the cigarettes even more addictive. An investigative reporter at CBS's "60 Minutes", Lowell Bergman, convinces Wigand to testify to these allegations in an interview. Wigand risks his entire future by doing so. He is harassed and threatened for coming out with the information. Despite the risks that Wigand has taken, the executives at CBS decide not to air the interview because of fear of litigation from Brown and Williamson.

The key ethical dilemma presented in the movie is this decision whether or not to air the interview. The CBS executives decide not to air it for purely monetary reasons. They were in negotiations to be bought out by Westinghouse and the possible litigations would lower their stock. This is in direct conflict with the code of ethics to which the journalistic industry is supposed to adhere.

One must also take into account that the executives at CBS were not journalists. They were businessmen. Their loyalty should be to the stockholders (even though they are themselves stockholders). Beyond this *prima facie* case of protecting the stockholders, we must however weigh the risks of damaging the company's integrity. This could also affect the stock prices.

Other ethical dilemmas include the decision of Wigand to adhere to his personal integrity rather than company loyalty. This can be an extremely difficult decision in that whistle blowers often find themselves blacklisted and find it hard to secure employment at a new company. Of course the other major ethical dilemma would be that of the tobacco company to decide to lie to congress and knowingly produce a harmful and addictive product rather than disclose their findings and try to create a safer product.

I would like to think that if I were the executive making the final decision of whether or not to air the interview that I would choose to air it. I would retain my journalistic integrity even at the risk of losing a good amount of money for my stockholders and myself. It is hard to say without actually being in their position.

There is more to look at ethically than just the issue of loyalty to stockholders versus integrity. One must also look at the fact that my company had a hand in destroying a man's (Wigand's) life. I would be remiss to allow his sacrifice to go for naught. The company has an ethical responsibility to Wigand to air his interview.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, one of the principal tests of which decision is the most ethical is to find which does the greater good for the majority. There can be no question that airing the interview would help more people to a much larger degree than not airing it would. Airing it would educate the world as to the true dangers of cigarette smoking. It would also send a message to corporations that they cannot hide behind non-disclosure agreements when it comes to public safety issues.