

SILO MENTALITY AND ITS ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE DEFENSE INDUSTRY

[and elsewhere in all organizations]

Patricia H. Werhane

Professor Emerita, University of Virginia and DePaul University

ABSTRACT

One of the lingering ethical issues in all organizations, and in this essay I shall focus only on the defense industry, is what one might call “silo mentality.” Silo mentality is a widely occurring phenomenon wherein a particular division of a company is so focused on their priorities that they neglect or fail to perceive how those priorities affect or are affected by other divisions in the company or other corporate members of their industry. In the defense industry where there is a great deal of collaborative work between companies to complete a finished product, focusing within one’s silo can have dangerous consequences. To take two classic examples, the Challenger and the Columbia explosions, in both instances, in brief, and for different reasons, not all of NASA’s subcontractors communicated properly with each other and with NASA as to the risks entailed in their contributions to the constructing and evaluating the structure of the shuttle in question. And within NASA itself, very simply put, it appears that many engineers and managers seemed to have had different perceptions of the risks involved on those launches, and neither (and there were others) understood the mindsets (and thus the risk analyses) of the other.

Obviously I have drastically oversimplified those complex cases, but they illustrate how a group of well-meaning individuals doing fine work can become so preoccupied with their expertise and priorities that in their “silo” they miss important elements. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel¹ have called these “blind spots,” and I am arguing that they occur, at least in part, because of this preoccupation with one’s own silo of expertise.

In this presentation I shall outline the notion of “silo mentality, give some well-documented historical examples, and suggest some remedies to this set of ongoing ethical issues.

¹ Bazerman, M. and Tenbrunsel, A., 2011. *Blind Spots*. Princeton University Press. See also, Werhane, P. et. al, 2013. *Obstacles to Ethical Decision-Making*. Cambridge University Press.