

Describe the most difficult decision you have made and its effect on you.

(Note: Some facts have been changed to protect identity of the person.)

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An engineer at our Illinois plant detected a leak in the water pipe in the production line engaged in the production of breakfast cereal for a longstanding client. We fixed it, but it broke again. Since the potentially durable solution didn't work, we improvised by strategically placing plastic stoppers to divert water. This worked, but with this method there was a tiny, tiny chance of water seeping into the product, which could compromise its quality.

We had two options at this stage. One, continue with the production with a very small chance of product getting compromised. Two, halt the production till the process was 100 percent safe.

Since it was very unlikely for the water to find way to the product, it made business sense to not disrupt production because in absence of a similarly-configured idle production line it would have taken three months to resume production. And we had a strict delivery deadline to honor and revenue loss (arising from loss in time) to safeguard.

Besides, we sample-check our products for any breach in quality, and if at all the compromised product found its way into retail shops, it was unlikely to affect the health of consumers. Last, the plastic-stopper arrangement was in place for few weeks at best till we found a permanent solution.

The team at the plant considered the problem from multiple angles. The engineers were confident that the quality won't be compromised, which to me looked more like non-acceptance of their weak areas. Representative of the sales team, though concerned about the quality, was more worried about breaching the delivery deadline. I too thought parochially. Being the representative from finance, I was more concerned about the financial implication of our decision. I was worried that if in future an inquest pointed toward any oversight leading to financial loss, my fledgling career would take a serious beating.

But then I thought about the worst possible scenario – the compromised product finding way to end consumers' dining tables. Although the chances were remote, it could potentially affect our relationship with our existing client and erode our brand.

We clearly didn't have the client's best interests in our minds; we were more concerned about ours. It was here something inside me snapped, and I decided to recommend 100 percent safe option, even if it meant loss in the short term.

Few days later, we defended our recommendations in the presence of senior leadership. There was debate, but the leadership decided to stop production immediately. It took us four months to ready another production line, but the customer, though disappointed at the delay, was appreciative of our concern for their interest.

Seeing the reaction of the customer and the strengthening of our relationship since then has left an immutable business fundamental with me: Interest of customer is paramount even at a short-term cost. Second, when I reflected back on the experience, I realized that competing thoughts in my mind and opposing views of others drained me because I was expecting an easy solution. What if I had entered the process expecting challenges? This mental twist would have made the process less overwhelming. Since, I have developed a mental framework of entering the 'arena' with an open mind, leaning toward expectation of a tough ride.