CASE #7: CULTURAL CONFLICT VS. IMPROVING WORK, SAFETY & LIVING STANDARDS

"The Dilemma of the Mindful Miner"

Ethical values always imply standards of worth. They are the standards by which we measure the goodness of our lives.

~ David B. Ingram & Jennifer A. Parks

(This case, in the first person, has only been changed to conceal the identities of the participants and the country in which it took place. It is presented exactly as it was reported.)

"I worked for World Metals Corporation (WMETCO) in the United States and was assigned to become manager of one of the company's mines in a South American country. I flew from New York to the capital city of the South American country. After I was met at the airport we had to travel about ten hours by car. We drove along dry riverbeds and through mountain passes, the driver essentially navigating by the stars. We arrived the next morning at the mining camp. We drove along the side of the steep mountain down into the town. I had never seen anything like it."

"There were about a hundred mud brick huts with thatch roofs built precariously along the walls of the valley. A single dirt road with intersecting dirt paths wove between the homes. At the doorways were dozens of small dark- haired children sitting quietly with old women."

"An old sewer system, small clay chimneys spewing black smoke from kerosene fires, no glass windows, a few goats and llamas wandering freely with the chickens, but what struck me the most was the silence."

"These were homes of the men and families who worked for us. I was their manager and these people were my responsibility."

"We traveled through the valley to the top of the next hill where I met with the mine superintendent. He was of Spanish descent and had been educated at a university in South America. He lived with the accountants and engineers in a compound of small houses made from cement blocks and tar pitch. We sat outside on an old table made from oil drums and discussed the state of the mine. He was very proud of the operation. He had only been there for a year now, and the mine was very profitable. He had even gone so far as to bring water in daily by truck from the local town as a return haul for the trucks carrying ore to the rail yard. Prior to this, the wives of the miners would line up at 4:00 in the morning and hope to catch the run-off from a small spring at the base of the mine site . . . a mile away. He had started a company store and a small school for the local children. He had even arranged for a doctor to visit the mine once a month from a nearby state-owned mine. He was an experienced man and was satisfied that the condition of the community and the profitability of the mine were better than when he had arrived."

"I was deeply troubled by this poverty and wanted further improvements in the living and working conditions."

"We began to institute changes. We had about 120 miners who would make their way to the mouth of the mine at about 5:00 in the morning. With hand-held kerosene lamps and hand picks they would walk down the winding tunnels along the mine shaft to the base of the mine, about 500 feet

below. I never went to the bottom of the mine. I was scared that the shaft might collapse."

"After this half hour long journey through the dark and wet mine, they would set to pick-axing the ore veins to loosen the ore from the rock. Once they gathered about a shopping bag full of ore, they would return to the base of the mineshaft and then send up their kerchief on the end of a line that ran from a pulley at the top of the shaft. At that point the miner's wife would recognize her husband's kerchief and drop a calfskin bag from the line to her husband 500 feet below. The miner would then load the ore in the bag and his wife and her friends would pull the ore to the top of the shaft. The wife would then take the ore, return to her assigned sorting area, and there she and her children would proceed to sort out the high-grade form the low-grade. The ore piles would be inspected and taken away to the warehouse by one of the engineers. The miner would then be paid for the amount of ore entrusted to the engineer for weighing. These were primitive conditions, but methods that had been in effect in the small mining industry for over a hundred years. I wanted to change and improve things."

"We started by buying the miners the latest in American lamps and battery packs. This would increase safety standards, and, I hoped, productivity. Well, my good intentions were a disaster. The next day, few of the miners appeared for work. Where were they? They had taken their newfangled American lighting, traveled over to the nearby Russian tin mining project, sold the lamps and battery packs, and with their newly acquired cash disappeared for three days on a binge in the local town. I had satisfied an ethical issue regarding safety and working conditions, but lost three days of productivity. The superintendent didn't dare tell me that he had told me so."

"I thought we had a special responsibility as well. We bought large sheets of aluminum that could be used for roofing instead of the thatch, which wasn't very effective during the rainy season. The camp was buzzing. The local wives thanked me with small gifts as I left to visit the capital city."

"When I returned to the mine a month later I realized how much I had missed the point. All the aluminum roofs were gone and in their place was the old thatch. The day after I left the mine, the women of the camp had stripped the aluminum sheets and sold them as scrap. Unlike their husbands, though, they spent the money on clothing and food for their families."

"The records of the company store revealed a most serious issue. All of the miners were in debt to us, many of them for coca. These were the leaves of the plant from which comes cocaine. It was not illegal to chew the leaves as we would chew tobacco. I took a stand on this issue, as I couldn't accept an American company supporting this kind of habit. We were going to stop selling the coca leaves at the company store and discourage its use at the mine. The miners were very vocal. They argued that they needed the stimulating effects to get oxygen in their systems when they worked deep in the mines. Ignoring their protests, we stopped selling the coca. The miners went on strike."

"I offered to forgive all the company store debts, thinking that the financial incentive would prompt a return to work. Instead, now they wouldn't return to work unless I forgave the debts and allowed coca use. This went on for a week. I was struggling with the ethical issues while losing production at the mine in a good market. I finally relented, in part, at the insistence of the local engineers who tried to persuade me that I could not possibly understand the type of working conditions under which these men toiled. Back to work everyone went, chewing the coca and creating new debts at the company store."

"There were other issues we faced every day . . . gifts to customs officials so that we would be granted our export licenses, or payments to the rail yard foreman so that we could secure railcars when there were none, but the last case I want to raise with you was the incident I had with the other mine owners at my first meeting of the Miner Association."

"These were a tough bunch of men. Many had started as prospectors in the mountains and had grown rich with the increase in the tin and silver prices. They were furious. I had brought a full-time doctor to our mining camp, hired more teachers for the camp's children, and was basically, in their views, 'too good to the Indians.' After all, they were only 'Indians' and hadn't I learned that they didn't appreciate the improved living conditions or the higher wages? I had created discontent in their own camps as work spread about the better conditions at the mine owned by the Americans. What was I, the Gringo, doing here disrupting methods and social practices that had been in effect for over a hundred years? The mood of the meeting hall got nastier by the moment until the chairman asked that I please consider leaving. I did, never to return, perhaps emotionally protected by my inability to speak even Spanish to understand the worst insults. By trying to reconcile my own ethical dilemmas, I alienated the very people with whom I shared common goals and problems in this South American country."

"Ultimately, I found myself adopting the local attitude toward mining. I left the operation of the mine to the local engineers and sent my local office manager to the Mining Association meetings. But there was something worse than withdrawing from day to day management. I made no further effort to foster the plight of the 'Indians' who worked for us. I treated the issue benignly. Instead, my time was spent dealing with the home office in New York, which dictated a policy of no pay-offs, yet insisted that I do what had to be done. What I should have been doing was spending more time with other executives in the local mining industry."

"Six months later I left and moved back to New York to manage the Ore Trading Department. But I was troubled. We had tried to promote social progress, but it was rejected by the people we were trying to help. We alienated the local business leaders for whom we tried to be a model. We operated within a stated corporate policy against petty gratuities, yet were expected to do whatever we had to get the job done. Perhaps, the most critical to our shareholders was that we were making business decisions based on our American sense of morality that proved to be detrimental to our profitability."

Discuss the personal, business and ethical issues raised by this case.

Christian situation ethics has only one norm or principle or law (call it what you will) that is binding and unexceptionable, always good and right regardless of circumstance. That is: "love"—the agape of the summary commandment to love God and the neighbor … situation ethics … calls us to keep law in a subservient place, so that only love and reason really count when the chips are down.

~ Joseph Fletcher