

The Hesitant Bystander with Safety Concerns and a CEO who is a Bully

A Teaching Case

By Mary Rowe

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About this teaching case: This case was written for managers and organizational ombuds who are asked for help by bystanders. The case is about a hesitant bystander¹ who had concerns about workplace safety and felt very intimidated by the company's CEO—a man perceived as a bully. The case begins with questions that you might consider when listening to this bystander. The most urgent question is whether the situation itself is an emergency. And the last question is: What options will you offer to this bystander?

Hesitation is not necessarily all bad if a situation is not an immediate emergency. Bystanders may need to think carefully about whether they have enough information—and how to act. Some bystanders (and bystanders of bystanders) feel uncomfortable—or even seriously worried—about how and from whom they have learned of what seems to be unacceptable behavior. Some bystanders need to consider whether a target or perpetrator of unacceptable behavior will welcome intervention. Bystanders usually will need to understand the legal obligations of their employer, if they report what they have learned and how they learned of it.

As with all complicated concerns, if you were asked for help by the hesitant bystander in this case, you might wish to do a quick scan—or a thorough analysis—of several questions, including:

- 1) Is this an emergency? How much time do you have? (What factors or new events could make this an emergency?)
- 2) Whose interests (including those of the employer) are at stake? Make a list of all the stakeholders.
- 3) What are the interests of each stakeholder?
- 4) What are the sources of power² of each stakeholder?
- 5) What are the *unconstructive* and *constructive* options open to each stakeholder?
- 6) Which rules, regulations, laws—and norms or principles—are relevant?
- 7) What resources are available to help with the various concerns?
- 8) With whom might you wish to talk, and if so, would you mention names, or speak anonymously, or about a “hypothetical situation?” And would you need permission to talk?
- 9) What options³ might be offered to Chris Lee? (Usually there are several options—and this may be true even in an emergency.) Think about options for this specific case and systemic options.⁴

¹ See Mary Rowe, [“Helping Hesitant Bystanders Identify Their Options: A Checklist with Examples and Ideas to Consider.”](https://www.ombudsassociation.org/assets/docs/JIOA_Articles/JIOA-2023-E-Special-Edition.pdf) *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* 16, no. 3 (2023), https://www.ombudsassociation.org/assets/docs/JIOA_Articles/JIOA-2023-E-Special-Edition.pdf.

² Mary Rowe, [“Sources of Power in Negotiations”](#) (one-page list). (Note: This list was originally compiled for MIT Sloan course 15.667.)

³ See Rowe, “Helping Hesitant Bystanders Identify Their Options,” for a checklist and discussion of many possible options for bystanders.

⁴ See Mary Rowe, “Consider Generic Options When Complainants and Bystanders Are Fearful,” *Journal of the International*

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[Note: Many details have been changed from the real case.]

Chris Lee walked slowly to the parking lot at midnight Friday night on the way home. Chiplinks Company had hired Chris six months ago as an assistant plant manager, but Chris was not happy.

Chris had come to work late Friday evening after a business trip, determined to catch up on paperwork (and take some work home) before Monday morning. Once inside the plant, Chris had decided to wander around, wanting to get to know the senior scientists. Many worked odd hours. Chris thought that a Friday night could be a good time to touch base with any round-the-clock type who happened to be there.

Chris had been greeted by the security guard at the desk and then had gone back to see the guard an hour later to ask a question: “Why are the toxic gas alarms off on the third floor? This gas has caused several deaths in this country.” The guard had looked nervous and denied noticing that the alarms were turned off, even though the alarm box lights at the front desk were obviously off. Chris had gone back to the third floor, methodically turning alarms back on in each area of the third floor, and methodically closing and locking the safety doors between the third-floor work areas, since the toxic gas alarm system would only work when the doors were all properly closed. The third-floor labs at first seemed empty; in fact, the whole building seemed empty.

However, at the end of the third floor, Chris found Piro Pati working alone. Pati was a technical assistant to Y.T. Links—the famous founder and CEO of the Chiplinks Company. Links held patents on major computer chip innovations and was well known for continued research in chip design. Pati was one of several technicians working on a new idea. This was an area of the building that Chris had hardly seen before; it was Y.T. Links’ personal domain.

Chris Lee was upset about the alarm system. “How can you not have noticed that the alarm system was off?” demanded an angry Chris of Piro Pati. At first Pati wouldn’t answer. Then Pati dissembled — and finally muttered that Dr. Links always turned the system off when working at night, to facilitate moving from work area to work area. Links had left just an hour ago, apparently just leaving the alarms turned off. Pati implied this was not unusual. Chris then surveyed the work area around Pati: open beakers, unlabeled containers, odd-looking bits of things on the floor. “Don’t you realize that these work habits might endanger everyone on the whole floor when they come in to work the next day?” Pati just nodded. “You know what Dr. Links is like; the boss always does this. We keep our mouths shut,” replied Pati.

Chris did indeed know what Links was like. Links’ temper tantrums were legendary. Employees, even valuable employees, had been humiliated in public and fired on the spot, just for asking questions. Chiplinks people were paid far above industry average, they had extraordinary benefits...and they kept their mouths shut.

Pati seemed to be the only scientist there, and Chris went home. Chris couldn't sleep. On the one hand, what Chris had found was apparently the norm on the third floor. And Pati had clearly warned against speaking up. On the other hand, the lab situation seemed to Chris to be untenable under government safety regulations, and especially alarming with the new research using toxic gas.

Early the next morning, weekend or no weekend, Chris made a call to the ombuds at the university where Chris had been a post-doc. "Can you help me with this? Is this as dangerous as I think it is? What should I do? At workshops at the university, you always told us that the first question we should ask ourselves in a tough situation is 'IS THIS AN EMERGENCY?' What should I do? And...*is* this an emergency?"