

Management Ethics and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

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Questionable management ethics, as typified by the 2002 business scandals, is hardly a new phenomenon in America. Indeed, a glance at the past reveals that management and vested self-interest have been bedfellows for at least a century. An examination of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, an entirely preventable disaster that claimed 146 lives, illustrates how greed blind-sided the owners to issues of worker safety. This paper explores the incident, the owners' indifference, and ethical issues suitable for classroom discussion; the goal is to equip instructors with enough information to acquaint their students with management ethics case that differs from the current crop and to dramatically portray the pitfalls of obsession with material wealth.

The Triangle case is quite compelling for classroom presentation and discussion, providing an excellent example of why regulations and oversight are essential. Sources are readily available, both in hard copy and on the Web; the following are the most accurate and will provide students with detailed information (please consult References for full publication information): David Von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (2003); Patricia L. Pence et al, "And All Who Jumped Died" (2003); and Douglas O. Linder, "The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire" (2002). For visual images, which have a far greater impact than words, two websites are useful: "The Triangle Factory Fire" at Cornell University's Kheel Center (this site also serves as a repository of primary documents), and "The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial" at University of Missouri, Kansas City, School of Law's "Famous Trials" site.

Precursors

Four items set the stage for the Triangle fire: the Iroquois Theater Fire, the development of fire prevention measures, engineering ethics codes, and union activism.

In 1903, a terrible fire at the "fireproof" (O'Brien & Benedict, n.d.) Iroquois Theater in Chicago killed 602, mainly women and children attending a matinee. A century later, it is still deemed the worst single-structure fire in US history (Arnold, 2005). Investigations revealed that fire prevention measures, such as an asbestos curtain designed to curtail the spread of a backstage fire to the cavernous auditorium, were ineffectual, and the design of the structure itself prohibited efficient egress: labyrinthine corridors were difficult to negotiate in darkness; bolted and/or inward-swinging doors trapped the panicked crowd inside (Brandt, 2003). The fire had

major impacts on Chicago fire codes, including revised building codes and requirements for posted floor plans clearly identifying exits. In fact, theaters worldwide retrofitted with fire prevention measures (Zasky, Burning, 2000-5). Improvements did not, however, extend to factories.

Most of the fire prevention devices we associate with buildings today existed at the turn of the 20th century, including firewalls and alarms, automatic sprinkler systems, fire extinguishers, and emergency exits, as did steel-framed, fire resistant structures (Wermiel, 2000). What differed, however, was building codes. Fire prevention measures--even something as simple as fire drills--were not required, and owners were reluctant to pay for expensive extras. Triangle owners Harris and Blanck, for example, refused to pay \$5,000 for an automatic sprinkler system, despite the fact that the contents of their factory, primarily fabrics and patterns, were extremely volatile (At Least 96 Killed, 2003). But the real reason may lie in indifferent, or even hostile, attitudes about the recent immigrants, especially Jews, who comprised the bulk of garment industry's workforce; as one business owner stated, "Let 'em burn. They're a lot of cattle anyway" (Pence et al., 2003, p. 418).

Triangle-era engineering ethics codes, such as the one developed by the American Institute of Consulting Engineers, also are helpful in defining the ethos of the times. They focus solely on the behavior of individual engineers and interactions between engineers and clients. The 12 clauses of the AICE code detail caution in financial arrangements, conflicts of interest, and competition, especially in regards to bidding practices (1911). Protection for workers and the general public is not addressed, and the field of safety engineering did not exist then.

Finally, the Triangle factory itself was controversial. Before the fire, it had received enormous publicity due to a workers' strike in 1909. Slave labor conditions in Manhattan's burgeoning garment district gave rise to discontent as workers, typically young, immigrant women, toiled 10-12 hours a day, six or seven days a week, for about \$6. Factory conditions ranged from dismal to deplorable, and management typically locked exit doors, to prevent workers from taking extra breaks or pilfering materials. In fact, as noted on the AFL-CIO website, "It is estimated that more than 100 workers died every day on the job . . ." (n.d.).

By November 1909, desperate to improve working conditions and aroused by the stirring speeches of Samuel Gompers and Clara Lemlich--a 15-year-old Ukrainian-born worker--at a meeting of the International Ladies Garment Workers= Union, thousands of workers from 500 factories, led by the Triangle ladies, went on strike in the streets of Manhattan, demanding decreased hours and increased wages (AFL-CIO, n.d.). The strike, dubbed "The Uprising of 20,000," lasted 14 months, and while more than 300 factories capitulated to labor demands, Triangle was not among them (Lower East Side, 2005).

These four conditions provide a backdrop and social context for the disastrous 1911 fire. The Chicago fire of 1903 underscores the inadequate application of fire prevention measures of the

time, more buoyed by hope than substance; engineering ethics codes avoid mentioning public safety; and labor unrest made management more obstinate about acquiescing to implementing additional safety precautions.

The Incident

Saturday, March 25, 1911, dawned bright and beautiful in New York City, with clear skies and warm weather. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, owned by “Shirtwaist Kings” Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, occupied the top three floors of the steel-framed, 10-story Asch Building, located in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, in the heart of the garment district. It was one of more than 800 “loft” buildings, standing between 8 and 20 stories high, that had sprung up between 1901 and 1911 in response to the growing demands of the garment industry: cheap labor, inexpensive fabrics, and new technology, combined with the “Gibson Girl” ideal of the independent woman (see Figure 1), resulted in a doubling of blouse manufacturing within a decade (Von Drehle, 2003).

The high-ceilinged loft buildings were perfect for manufacturing concerns such as Triangle, for they allowed the owners to pack a maximum of workers into a minimum of space and provided the required 250 cubic feet of airspace per person. Triangle owners divided the floors according to function: cutting on the eighth, sewing on the ninth, and administrative offices and shipping on the tenth.

The floors were serviced by two 12-person elevators, two stairwells measuring 33" in width, and one very flimsy fire escape, not nearly enough, in retrospect, to support the quick evacuation of more than 500 workers. Exit doors were inward-swinging and generally locked during operating hours (Von Drehle, 2003).

On this day, the factory was a beehive of activity, even at closing time. At 4:40 p.m., eighth floor cutter Isidore Abramowitz noticed a tiny flame in his scrap bin, the result, apparently, of a carelessly discarded match or cigarette. At



Figure 1. The Gibson Girl=s waist-and-skirt attire influenced fashion for more than 30 years (Thomas, 2001-7).

Triangle, workers collected scraps in large bins, which fit under the cutting tables; debris was hauled away every two months or so by rag dealer Louis Levy, a ton at a time (Von Drehle, 2003). The large bins, however, served another purpose: they provided hiding places at inspection times for the “cleaners,” children hired to snip extra threads from the blouses (Pence et al., 2003).

Despite a water dousing, the flame persisted, fed by volatile fabric scraps and tissue paper patterns draped over tables and hung about the room. When the fire reached the airshafts, it exploded on the top two floors (Von Drehle, 2003) and became an inferno. In 15 brief minutes, 146 Triangle workers, aged 13-23, were dead, their bodies scattered throughout the factory’s ninth floor and littering the sidewalks of surrounding streets.

Floor by Floor

Workers on the eighth floor were lucky: all, save one, escaped, either by crowding into the small elevators, clambering down the narrow staircases, or exiting via the flimsy fire escape.

Tenth floor workers, including the owners, likewise escaped. Warned by a message sent from the eighth floor through the teleautograph, an early fax device, many fled to the roof. But the Asch Building was stories shorter than adjacent buildings. Their plaintive cries alerted Frank Sommers, a professor at nearby New York Law University (Von Drehle, 2003); he and his students lowered ladders to the roof and rescued 150 people (Pence et al., 2003).

Workers in the sewing room, however, faced a grim fate, attributable to room arrangement. The ninth floor featured continuous rows of sewing machine tables, 75 feet long, with no walkways except around the perimeter. The 240 workers sat with their chairs back-to-back, with little walking space between. Tables were separated by a trough, into which the workers placed finished pieces. The few who survived managed to squeeze through the sole open exit before the panic-stricken crowd rendered the inward-swinging door inoperable. Those seated at machines in the middle of the room were doomed.

Escape via the stairwells meant running through a formidable curtain of fire, and the main elevator was stalled at the ground floor, held fast by the weight of 30 women who, in desperation, jumped down the shaft. Operator Joseph Zito described the scene in chilling detail: “They kept coming down from the flaming floors above. Some of their clothing was burning as they fell. I could see streaks of fire coming down like flaming rockets” (Von Drehle, 2003, p.154). The jingle of coins accompanied the thuds of falling bodies; Saturday was payday at Triangle, and wages rolled out of pay packets as the women jumped to their deaths (Beedle, 1996).

Some ingenious male employees formed a “human bridge” to the window of an adjacent building, and several women crawled across to safety. As panic set in, however, the weight of the fleeing workers collapsed the bridge, and all fell to their deaths (Pence et al., 2003). Two

dozen more died when the fire escape collapsed; they were either impaled on an iron fence or crashed through a glassed section of sidewalk into the building's basement, their flaming bodies igniting more fires (Von Drehle, 2003).

Those remaining in the workroom were faced with a daunting decision: to burn or to jump. Some 63 chose the latter, hurtling 85 feet to the pavement below. Observers initially thought that the flaming bundles were bolts of cloth. As they unfurled, however, they were clearly people. Firefighters positioned safety nets and blankets to no avail: the bodies hit with a force of 11,000 pounds, tearing through the nets and the sidewalks beneath (Wallechinsky & Irving, 1975-81). Most leapt in pairs or groups, their combined weight further rendering the nets useless (Beedle, 1996).

Union Press reporter William Shepherd was out and about, enjoying a late afternoon stroll in the pleasant spring weather, when he came upon the biggest story of his life. Transfixed, he watched the human downpour in horror: "Down came bodies in a shower, burning, smoking, lighted bodies, with the disheveled hair of the girls trailing upward" (Von Drehle, 2003, p.159).

An hour later, it was all over. Inside, a nightmare awaited the firemen: 19 bodies melted to a locked door (Pence et al., 2003), a heap of 50--some with arms clasped about each others= necks--who sought shelter in a dressing room, others strewn about the room, suffocated by heat and toxic fumes "so intense that they dropped where they stood as flowers might wither," fire marshall Edward Beer later testified (Von Drehle, 2003, p.186). Fire chief Edward Croker described a grisly scene on the ninth floor, "bodies burned to bare bones, skeletons bending over sewing machines" (Linder, 2002).

Bodies were laid out in a makeshift morgue, awaiting identification by relatives. More than 100,000 mourners participated in the funeral procession, with another 250,000 silently observing the solemn parade (Hoenig, 2005).

Aftermath

Two days after the fire, New York City officials launched an intensive, two-week investigation that resulted in the indictments of Harris and Blanck for manslaughter (Linder, 2002). Three days after the fire, the Shirtwaist Kings reopened Triangle at another location (Pence et al., 2003).

The trial began on December 4; as Harris and Blanck entered the crowded courtroom, they were greeted with shouts of "Murderers! Murderers!" from victims' angry relatives. The court even brought in extra policemen to quell the disturbance (Linder, 2002).

Prosecutor Charles Bostwick called 103 witnesses, including Triangle employees (Linder, 2002). However, Harris and Blanck had the savvy and finances to hire a brilliant lawyer, Max Steuer, whom *The New Yorker* described as "born to be a lawyer as Mozart was born to music" (Von

Drehle, 2003, p. 224). Using ingenious, albeit ethically slippery, logic, he managed to cast doubt on survivors' eyewitness testimony and convinced the judge to give the jury an impossible charge: not only were they to determine if exit doors were locked, but that Harris and Blanck knew they were (Von Drehle, 2003).

The trial lasted for three weeks, and after deliberating less than two hours, the jury delivered its verdict of not guilty. Exonerated, Harris and Blanck had a police escort out of the courtroom back door but were chased down a subway station by an angry crowd screaming for justice (Von Drehle, 2003).

Twenty-three families filed civil suits for damages. Harris and Blanck collected \$200,000 in insurance for loss of the factory (Pence et al., 2003). By the time suits were settled in 1914, each plaintiff received a payment of \$75 (Wallechinsky & Irving, 1975-81), a paltry sum to compensate for the loss of a life.

The Owners

Triangle owners Isaac Harris and Max Blanck were self-made men, cut in the classic Horatio Alger mold. Born in Russia in the 1860s, they emigrated, separately, to America in the 1880s and set up a partnership about two decades later. It was Blanck who made the initial foray in the garment trade, as a "bundle" contractor with a small shop. By 1895, his business expanded and his three brothers became involved. A few years later, Harris fell in love with Blanck's wife's cousin, a move that brought him into the family business. In 1900, Triangle was born, and by 1906, the Shirtwaist Kings were firmly ensconced in the Asch Building (Von Drehle, 2003).

Their timing was fortuitous, for by 1909, Americans were spending the contemporary equivalent of \$23 billion annually on ready-made clothing (Von Drehle, 2003), and Triangle was one of the largest manufacturers of ladies' blouses, producing 10-12,000 shirtwaists a week (Hoenig, 2005), worth about \$21 million a year (Zasky, Fire, 2000-5), in contemporary dollars.

Also by 1909, labor unrest was coming to a head. Harris and Blanck led the management response by promptly hiring thugs to assault the striking workers, whom they later fired. In their stead, their hired prostitutes, "to show," as John Hoenig suggests, "their contempt for the strikers" (2005, p. 22). Considering their own immigrant roots, Harris and Blanck's attitudes towards their workers was ironic at best, contemptuous at worst. Pauline Newman, who started work at Triangle when she was eight years old and escaped the fire, captured the workers' frustration in a National Public Radio interview:

And you worked seven days a week. If you didn't come in on Sunday, you were fired on Monday. If you were caught talking to the girls next to you, you were fired. The attitude of the employers was that you are no human being, you just have two hands, and your two hands, to them, weren't worth more than what they paid. In other words, it was a damnable place to work, but there was no alternative. The others were just as bad (Baker,

1999).

In retrospect, Hoenig explains, “Blanck and Harris were not decent businessmen. They were dishonest, vicious, cheap and unrepentant” (2005, p. 21). And they were all too familiar with fire, paying premium insurance rates due to their involvement in four prior fires, including two at Triangle. The Asch Building itself had hosted seven fires (Von Drehle, 2003). Some suggest that the two concocted small, early morning fires at their factories to get rid of end-of-the-season inventories and thus enhance profits (Hoenig, 2005). But the 1911 fire was different, bringing to the forefront of public attention squalid working conditions and, more importantly, locked exits that doomed the ninth floor workers.

Ethical Issues

From this brief recounting of the case, students are quick to discern a number of obvious ethical issues involving the owners, treatment of workers, and general business disposition. Less visible are the engineering-related issues. Engineering, however, is the environment that we live in; therefore, it behooves us to try to understand the workings of structures in which we spend our lives. And in the Triangle case, it was the interplay of business and engineering that resulted in disaster.

Greed

The overriding ethical issue in the Triangle case is greed. Not only did Harris and Blanck pay pitiful wages for excruciating work in wretched conditions, they actually benefitted from the fire to the tune of \$445 per victim. Their high insurance premiums paid off: they collected nearly \$65,000 in excess of the value of the factory=s contents (Pence et al., 2003).

Indeed, their greed was a catalyst for the loss of life, as the primary reason for the locked exit was to prevent employees from stealing fabric and lace from the factory. During the trial, however, Harris admitted on the stand that the total cost of stolen goods amounted to less than \$25 over five years (Linder, 2002). Even by today’s standards, this amounts to only \$100 a year.

It is tempting to think that, as a society, we have outgrown such adolescent selfishness, that we are more altruistic now. However, as Mike Nixon of the *St. Louis Daily Record* (2006) points out, there are certain similarities between the Triangle fire and the Enron scandal: both cases resulted in substantial damage to employees, management was clearly responsible, and the public was outraged. But with Enron, Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling were found criminally liable. Hopefully, Nixon contends, the Enron verdicts will have the same type of impact on financial and investment safety as Triangle had on physical safety.

Callousness

After the Triangle fire, New York fire chief John Kenyon stated his belief that “no life would

have been lost” if the factory had an automatic sprinkler system (Davis, 1988, p.7). One of the most disturbing elements of this case is that the Shirtwaist Kings simply did not care about the welfare of their employees. Had they shown the least bit of compassion and concern, they would have invested the paltry amount necessary to equip the factory with fire prevention measures such as firewalls and automatic sprinkler systems.

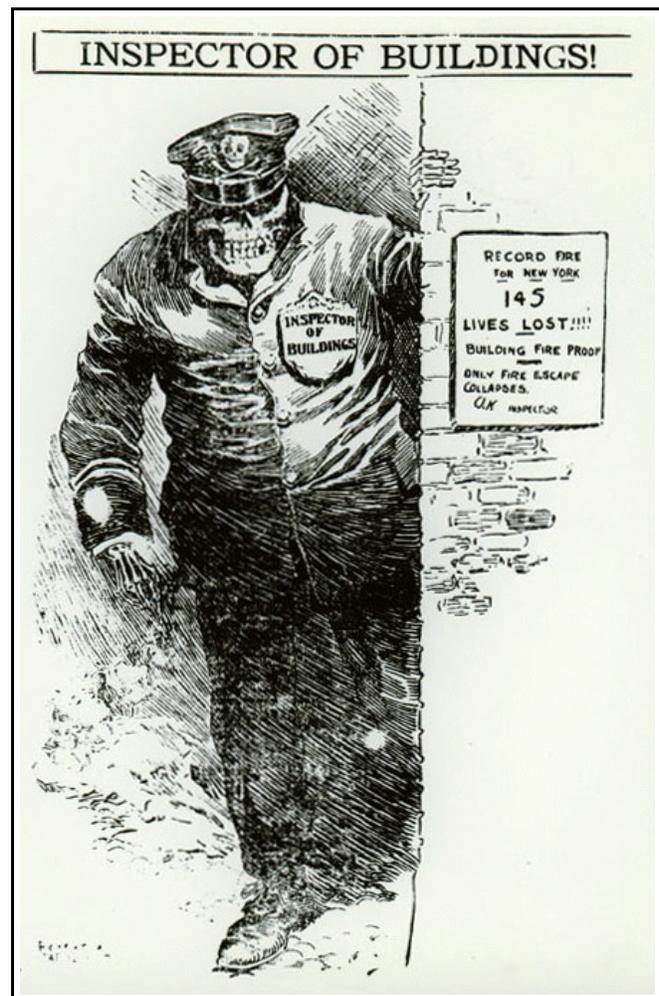
Or they could have conducted regular fire drills at minimal cost, something they flatly refused to do, even though insurance inspector Peter McKeon suggested two years before the fire that such a move would be prudent (At Least 96 Killed, 2003). This simple measure would have alleviated much of the confusion at the time of the fire and saved lives, giving the ninth floor workers the additional three minutes required to escape (Von Drehle, 2003).

However, due to a seemingly endless supply of immigrant labor, especially Jewish tailors, factory workers were viewed as expendable (Behrens, 1983). Owners could, in fact, fire their entire workforce on one day, as happened in the Triangle strike of 1909, and hire a new crew the next. According to Leon Stein in *The Triangle Fire*, an early seminal work, “the women who produced the shirtwaists were both figuratively and literally invisible to the owners who profited from them” (1962, p.161).

Labor supply aside, Harris and Blanck had a moral obligation to provide for the safety of their workers, and they simply failed to do so. Fat wallets were apparently more important than human lives.

Inspections

In the public outrage that erupted after the fire, city building inspectors were pilloried in the press once it became known that the factory had regularly passed inspections. Figure 2 shows a typical editorial cartoon that clearly places the blame on a cadaverous inspector.



While the city building department vigorously defended itself by noting that few staff were available to inspect and that construction documents on file complied with the law, others

suggested that inspectors were “grossly incompetent” (Blame Shifted, 1911, p.1).

In truth, were it not for the tragic loss of life and subsequent trauma to New York’s collective psyche, inspection oversights at Triangle were so egregious as to be a comedy of errors. Although inspector McKeon expressed concern about the locked exits and recommended fire drills two years before the fire, no one commented on the grossly inadequate escape routes: the narrow, rickety fire escape that would hold,

at best, two people, or the 33" wide spiral stairways and tiny elevators that would make mass evacuation of hundreds of workers virtually impossible. Internal fire prevention measures were likewise ignored: valves on water faucets were

frozen and the fire hose fabric was fraying. Perhaps the most flagrant oversight that affected all of New York City’s 800 loft buildings was the fact that not one single fire truck had a ladder that would reach beyond six stories (Von Drehle, 2003), making firefighting a futile effort. Willful indifference to worker safety apparently extended beyond factory management.

Figure 2. An incompetent inspector proclaims Triangle factory fireproof (Triangle Shirtwaist, n.d.)

Building Codes

Lenient building codes of the times also seemed to reinforce apathy to the largely immigrant workforce. The Asch Building, and, by extension, most of the loft buildings, barely met code: had the floor space been slightly greater, another exit staircase would have been required; had the building been slightly taller, another fire escape would have been added, and the wooden floors, trim, and window frames would have been replaced with concrete and metal, thus affording more protection. In two respects, building designers failed to meet code: the fire escape ended at the second floor, over a skylight, and a major exit door swung inward (The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial, n.d.).

Building codes, however, are minimal expectations, and history is littered with examples of regulations loitering behind technology. The Titanic sank the year after Triangle burned, and it too met minimal expectations; in fact, the Titanic had more lifeboats than required by the British Board of Trade. In an ethical universe, however, just meeting the letter of the law is insufficient.

Conclusions

When Triangle burned, people thought it would be remembered forever; all of those young women dying for no reason is pathetic, in the classical sense. The fire was a pivotal event in labor reform, women’s emancipation, and New York City fire code revisions: Triangle is the reason why doors in public buildings open outward and why structures are equipped with automatic sprinkler systems. In reality, though, Triangle is but one entry on a growing list of tragedies that could have been prevented, had those in charge exercised more compassion for

their workers and less concern for their pocketbooks.

As business instructors, however, we have the power to resurrect the past and reignite the passion and indignation of 1911, through vigorous analysis and discussion of this very sad case. Students, at least in my experience, tend to react viscerally to the Triangle fire, and when an emotional connection occurs, intellectual understanding often follows. Students who understand and practice an ethics of caring will, hopefully, become more enlightened managers and perhaps help to stem the tsunami of greed that currently engulfs the corporate world.

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Biography

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