



Kevin disarms a raider attempting to hold-up his bank branch. The criminal flees empty handed and is later arrested. Kevin is hailed as a hero. But some colleagues say he should be sacked. BOB SOUSTER examines the ethical issues.

“People are more important than money: in an armed raid, staff should comply with the criminal’s demands and are instructed not to resist under any circumstances.”

The risks of have-a-go heroism

Toni, the Human Resources Manager of GBT Bank plc joins a discussion at the weekly Management Committee meeting. It concerns an incident at one of the Bank’s branches when an armed raider failed to force the staff to hand over the cash in their tills.

The raider entered the branch on a busy Monday morning and threatened a cashier at gunpoint. Kevin, a business

development manager, was talking to a client in the banking hall at the time but was standing behind the raider. He attempted to apprehend the criminal and knocked the gun from his hand. A short fight ensued, and the criminal escaped empty handed. He was apprehended soon after by the police and was subsequently charged.

The incident was widely reported in the local media and on regional television.

The sensationalist reports highlighted Kevin as a ‘have-a-go-hero’. In a brief prime time news interview recorded two hours after the incident, he said he was only too happy to play his part in protecting the Bank and his colleagues, concluding that ‘any responsible citizen would act in the same way’.

The executives, concerned at the impact of the attempted robbery, felt it would encourage others to act like Kevin in similar future circumstances. Toni said Kevin had acted extremely irresponsibly and should be disciplined. Erica, the Director of Operations, agreed, adding that the Bank should issue a formal warning to Kevin. She said his actions practically amounted to gross misconduct; he was lucky they were not dismissing him.

But Sally, the Company Secretary, felt that could demonise the Bank as public sentiment would be very much behind Kevin. Dismissing him would be a disaster and the Bank would have to explain itself to angry customers. James, the Finance Director, shared Sally’s admiration for Kevin, but said he would confine his views to this discussion behind closed doors.

Evaluating the attitudes

The universally accepted view of managing situations like this is that people are more important than money: in an armed raid,

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staff should comply with the criminal's demands and are instructed not to resist under any circumstances. This policy is always supported by additional guidelines, such as ensuring that customers and staff are not endangered and that the alarm is sounded only when it's safe to do so.

Toni's view that Kevin acted irresponsibly is correct. Tackling the gunman could easily have caused shots to be discharged, injuring or killing staff, customers, the criminal or Kevin himself. An assumption has to be made that the gun is real and loaded, even if it's later found to be a fake.

Erica's view that Kevin could be disciplined or dismissed is also correct: Kevin's duty to the employer is to comply with company policy and instructions. The Bank could hold Kevin's actions to have endangered his colleagues and others. The coverage of the incident could also encourage others in 'copycat' behaviour with different and more tragic consequences.

Sally rightly identifies the reputational consequences of disciplining or dismissing

Kevin. Although his actions were at odds with policy and therefore wrong, they'd be considered right by several important stakeholders, including many customers. The public's sense of justice would support Kevin. Sally could also have pointed out that, thankfully, very few of us have to confront such a situation, and cannot know exactly how we'd react in the stress of the moment.

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(I can confirm this, having had the misfortune of once being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was more passive than Kevin in the interests of self-preservation! I feel his action was probably impulsive.)

James is wrong to admire Kevin, but is certainly not alone: people will often support those who react like Kevin, even though their objective is not to attract viewers or sell newspapers.

The Bank should certainly reinforce its policy to minimise the prospect of others acting in the same way. It could perhaps also issue a public statement, expressing satisfaction that nobody was hurt and stressing that it does not condone resistance. Kevin should be reminded that the Bank expects full compliance with company policy as a minimum requirement in future.

This case is based on an actual incident: in 2009, a US bank dismissed an employee under similar circumstances.



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