

G.M.'s Failure

Marie Sachse lost control of her 2004 Saturn in 2009, striking a tree head-on. The air bags should have deployed, but they didn't.¹ Sachse died eight hours later from internal injuries. G.M. has been forced to recall over 26 million cars because faulty ignition switches caused engines and airbags to shut off during driving. The flawed switches were linked to 32 crashes and 13 deaths. Currently, G.M. is facing a congressional investigation and criminal probe.² G.M. engineers knew about the problem as far back as 2001, and although the problem was linked to crashes as early as 2008, the company did not recall any cars at that time. Released company emails showed that the ignition switches were not originally replaced because doing so would have cost 90 cents more per unit.

In the aftermath, Mary Barra, G.M.'s new CEO, has fired 15 employees. According to Barra, the failure to act was caused by a "pattern of incompetence and neglect" and a cost-based corporate culture.³

One fired engineer, Raymond DeGiorgio, defended his work. He approved the faulty switch in 2001 and secretly ordered new parts in 2006. While he eventually fixed the problem, his decision not to tell his company that the parts were faulty in the first place left many unsafe cars on the road.

"All I can say is that I did my job," he said. "I didn't lie, cheat or steal. I did my job the best I could."⁴

Many people within the company, from low-level engineers to managers, knew there was a problem with the switches. But no one took full responsibility. Those involved, like DeGiorgio, could attempt to justify their actions by saying they did not have authority to act or were not ultimately responsible.

Many have called for G.M. as a company to be held responsible for the deaths, either through criminal charges or fines. But how much responsibility falls on the employees involved?

STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) When many workers collaborate to manufacture a product, as was the case at G.M., what extent is each worker responsible to address a moral problem?
- (2) What is the moral difference between deliberate action and deliberate inaction? Should an individual be held responsible for failing to act? Under what circumstances?
- (3) What responsibility do companies have to address the possibility that their products will fail in a way that causes death?

¹ <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20140411/AUTO0103/304110092>

² <http://www.vox.com/cards/gm-car-recall/why-didnt-gm-replace-the-faulty-switches-earlier>

³ <http://online.wsj.com/articles/gm-ceo-probe-found-pattern-of-incompetence-1401973966>

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/14/business/a-fatally-flawed-switch-and-a-burdened-engineer.html>