Dieselgate, data and corporate culture

A recurring theme in my blog posts has been *integrity*. Specifically, the need for people to show some as often as possible because of life's interconnectedness and the law of unintended consequences. (An aspect of said law is, broadly, that if you cut a corner, someone, somewhere will cop for it. And vice versa!)

For example, Ian Whittingham, the former roofer paralysed in a roof fall, used to tell a story about a chap who approached him after one of Ian's inspirational talks to confess he'd once seen an unguarded drop on a building site on the way for a much needed cuppa. He pretended he hadn't seen it, assuming someone else would deal with it. With bitter irony, the man who fell down it and died an hour later had been best man at his wedding.

We all know the poem that starts: "I could have saved a life today …" but normally the consequences are less direct and traceable and I want to make the link between tens of thousands of avoidable deaths worldwide last year and the first group of marketers to fudge some data to boost sales with a shrug and a "where's the harm in it?"

Fudging (or lying) to boost sales has been around forever. The song that England fans *should* sing at rugby matches, Jerusalem, is a case in point. The question it asks: "Did those feet, in ancient times, walk upon England's mountains green?" No, they most certainly did not – whoever the walker in question was or wasn't. It was a rumour made up by local monks to boost mead sales! Presently, hundreds of lawyers and investigators are spending tens of millions of dollars and euros trying to work out who's responsible for car maker VW's "dieselgate". This, of course, was where VW cracked the US market with a superb one-two, meeting stringent US pollution targets while delivering outstanding mileage figures. But the green technology only kicked in when two not four wheels were rotating and the steering wheel was immobile. Clever! (Less cleverly, the technology had a significantly negative impact on cars' performance so could only be switched on during testing.)

In due course a rogue team of engineers will end up in court along with managers who either encouraged it or let them get away with it. Though s*enior* management, who assure us they knew nothing, have fled to their retirement villas, the company does admit a general culture failure allowed this to happen. (We've certainly been *there* before.)

I want to suggest though that this was a major industrial accident waiting to happen because of broader cultural issues. And it *is* a major industrial incident. There are tens of thousands of young, old and physically vulnerable people whose deaths were speeded by diesel emissions. That's why the targets are increasingly stringent.

No one anywhere in the world has bought a car in recent years without looking at the official miles per gallon figures and deducting 10% to 20%. Even salesmen joke that you can achieve those figures "downhill with a following wind maybe". Lying about figures important to sales has been part of the automotive industry culture. It's only relatively recently that diesel emissions have become so important.

Challenge: Self-evident.You're reading this because you already know decisions in all departments can impact on health and safety, so just keep up the good work! A question instead: Petrolheads aside, VW's Beetle Herbie is almost certainly the most popular and best loved car in history. Am I being overly cynical when I wonder if the feel-good films are in any way connected to the really bad reputation of the man who commissioned the Beetle in 1934?

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