

Roman Holiday

(Case 1042)

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The Case:

Rashid is a freshly-minted engineer from City Technical Institute. His first job out of college is with the general construction firm, Rome Builders Inc., located down state. Rashid reports to work, eager to step into his new role. He finds out that his boss, Riley, is a seasoned contractor with a “tough but fair” reputation.

Riley wastes no time in giving Rashid an assignment. Rashid is sent to an office building construction site to monitor subcontractor work/activity relative to evaluation of subcontractor progress payment requests. Riley is clear in his instructions: “On measurable tasks, count quantities. For hourly personnel, your job is to count heads, keep time and make sure that they are working continuously; that’s it.” Riley goes on to complain about the necessity of keeping subcontractors on task: “You have to watch them like a hawk,” he says. Though Rashid feels as though he is being treated as an overqualified bean counter, he accepts the assignment and heads to the work site.

As with many projects, this one has a well-defined timeline and everyone is under pressure to keep to the schedule. While the City of Rome wasn’t built in a day, Rome Builders’ motto is that if they had been around, it would have been. In fact, this particular project has fallen behind schedule – a state of affairs that keeps Riley breathing fire.

One of the subcontractors that Rashid monitors is responsible for applying a protective coating to the steel beams of the new structure. Given the limitations specified by Riley – count heads and keep time – this is not what Rashid would call challenging work. He soon grows bored and decides to spend some of his time reviewing the project specifications in order to become better informed about the construction process. Having reviewed the specifications, it is not long before he notices a potential problem. In some instances, portions of the steel beams have been covered by walls and are thus inaccessible for the coating procedure. While Rashid is reluctant to delay progress, he is concerned about the potential oversight.

Some weeks pass as Rashid faithfully monitors the project. He notices, among other things, that the coating subcontractor is the main problem child relative to the project schedule. One reason for this is that Gibb, the coating subcontractor superintendent, is rarely on site. When Gibb does show up, he spends most of his time regaling his workers with his recent skeet shooting exploits.

One day, the building inspector, Janis, stops by for a scheduled code inspection. Gibb, Janis, and Rashid walk through the site, chatting amiably, as Janis checks for code compliance. At one point, Janis is focusing her attention on one of the beams that Rashid took note of earlier. She notes that the beam is partially covered by a wall and asks Gibb if the covered portion has also been coated per the specs. Gibb responds that it has been and he takes the opportunity to discuss the high premium he places on quality and thoroughness with his workers. Janis moves on to the next point of inspection without further comment. Rashid suspects that Gibb is lying through his teeth, but says nothing at the time.

The next day, before going to the site, Rashid stops by the office and catches Riley heading to a meeting. Rashid quickly expresses his concern about the beam coating and inspection issue. Riley is visibly agitated over the interruption in his day. He reminds Rashid that the project is behind schedule and flatly states that beam coating quality is the subcontractor's responsibility, and verification of quality is between the subcontractor and the inspector. Riley states: "Gibb has years of experience and knows what works. Your job is to keep on top of the project and *not* delay progress." With that, Riley stalks off to the conference room for his meeting.

Rashid is in a quandary. On the one hand, he is reluctant to press the issue because he is a new and inexperienced employee. On the other hand, Rashid cannot casually dismiss the coating issue and is concerned about quality, especially as it relates to public safety.

What should Rashid do?

Alternate Approaches and Survey Results for "Roman Holiday" (Case 1042)

1. *Go along, get along.* Rashid should accept Riley's assurances and return to his project responsibilities without delay.
Percentage of votes agreeing: 0%
2. *Cover your backside.* Rashid should accept Riley's assurances and get on with the project, after first taking the time to carefully document his concerns about the entire situation in a detailed memo to file.
Percentage of votes agreeing: 7%
3. *Use the opportunity to learn.* Since Rashid is admittedly inexperienced in such matters, he should "quietly" do some homework on the internet and with other subcontractors to determine how to identify whether the beams have been adequately coated, and he should go out to the site and make the appropriate inspection. If something is indeed amiss, Rashid should outline a recommended course of action and notify Riley of his findings.
Percentage of votes agreeing: 15%
4. *Et tu, Rashid?* Realizing that Riley will allow nothing to compromise the project schedule, Rashid should, without Riley's knowledge, approach

Rome Builder's vice president, Mr. Mac White, and share his concerns about the beam coating, and about Riley's acquiescence in the matter. Rashid should await further instruction while Mr. White deals with Riley.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 1%

5. *Comply with the code of ethics.* In the interest of the public health and safety, Rashid should pursue his concerns until he feels the matter is satisfactorily addressed. At the least, this would consist of doing some homework and having a qualified independent third party knowledgeable of the code requirements – perhaps Janis – more carefully inspect the partially-covered beams.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 33%

6. *There are many ways to solve a problem.* Rashid should call a friend at the local newspaper and – with the agreement that he be identified only as a “reliable source” – share his concerns about code compliance. He knows that his newspaper friend will make appropriate inquiry, and this will pressure Gibb and Riley to act responsibly without Rashid having to get wrapped up in company politics.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 1%

7. *Implement company loss prevention training.* Rashid should approach Riley and again share his concerns about the beam coating. However, this time he should suggest a game plan that acknowledges the liability of their company, such as requesting that Janis provide written confirmation of the adequacy of the beam coating. This gets Rashid and Riley legally off the hook if any problem occurs.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 10%

8. *Run towards the roar.* Rashid should approach Riley and again share his concerns about the beam coating. Further, he should suggest that both he and Riley visit Gibb to explain their concerns, as well as the ramifications of negligence and the fact that code specifications are not open to interpretation. This puts the issue squarely in Gibb's court – where it belongs.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 14%

9. *Go to the source.* Rashid should approach Riley and again share his concerns about the beam coating. Further, he should suggest that both he and Riley visit Janis and arrange for a meeting and inspection of the project to look into their concerns. Perhaps everything is to spec.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 14%

10. *Check it to them.* Rashid should inform Riley that he refuses to continue with the project, and he will resign from the company if necessary. While this will be costly to him, it is surely better than being around when “Rome” burns.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 4%

Forum Comments from Respondents

1. Rashid cannot ignore this potential problem; public health and safety and his company's liability are on the line.
2. Rashid should schedule an appointment with Riley so as not to "interrupt his day". In a calmer setting, Riley might be more willing to listen to Rashid.
3. Rashid should not back down at all. Rashid should continue to put pressure on Riley because if something happens in the future (because of safety), it will be Rashid's job and integrity on the line for not voicing his opinion according to the ASCE Code of Ethics.
4. Rashid should first take the opportunity to learn more; that is almost always a good place to start. Once better informed, Rashid should discuss his concerns with Riley. He and Riley should then take a closer look with Janis and have Janis evaluate whether the beams are adequately coated. If Janis cannot sign off on Gibb's work, then the group (Janis, Riley & Rashid) should go to Gibb and explain their concerns. The only acceptable solution is that the beam coating complies with the project specifications. The greatest potential difficulty for Rashid would be if Riley will not support a further, closer inspection. Then Rashid would have to go above or around Riley to have his concerns addressed. At the very least, Rashid should have Janis take a close look and ensure that the beams are properly coated.
5. Rashid should approach Riley when he is not distracted by a meeting and suggest they discuss the situation with Gibbs. If this does not correct the issue, Rashid should pursue the matter until his concern is satisfactorily addressed.
6. Rashid should go to Riley a second time. Riley is the key person to address this situation and Rashid should see to it that he gets a clear picture of the facts. Most of the other solutions are either too aggressive or lack ethical value.