Setting:

Glengarry Glen Ross is a movie about real estate salesmen working in a tough setting during a down economy trying to broker the sales of investment property to potential investors. The movie is set in an urban Chicago real estate office in the mid ‘80s or so. It was based on a play by David Mamet and starred some Hollywood heavyweights in the acting community. Al Pacino, Jack Lemmon, Ed Harris, and Alan Arkin play the 4 real estate brokers in the office. Kevin Spacey plays the office manager/supervisor of the agents and Alec Baldwin plays a hired gun “motivational speaker” that comes to the office in an attempt to remind the brokers how poorly they have been doing and to incentivize them to perform better. The movie takes place over a 15-20 hour period from the meeting the agents have with the motivational speaker one evening and ends the following morning when one of the agents admits to robbing the office the prior night. During the duration of the movie there are many unethical situations that arise during the interaction of the various parties. In this paper I will identify many of the ethical situations and dig into greater detail a few of the issues and how they possibly could have been avoided or better dealt with.

Environment:

The business world in this case is the real estate office owned by Mitch and Murray. The nature of the office is a high pressure; sell at any cost type of operation. They are generally selling investment property to mid to high income investors. The nature of the investment property is not elaborated upon very well, but the agents themselves make comments about properties they have sold in the past as being major accomplishments to get investors to buy so it is suspected to not be of very high grade property. The economic times are tough at the time of the movie which contributes to the sour attitudes of the cast in the movie and the high pressure nature of their jobs. The Alec Baldwin role in the movie is to give the sales force a pep talk to try and get them to sell more. His speech winds up being a diatribe in calling the agents names, tearing them down so they feel worthless, and then
ultimately firing them all but providing them a week to try and earn their jobs back. The three worst sellers of late in the office are present during his speech and he ends it by telling them that only two of the three would get their jobs back. This creates a sense of urgency, frustration, and anger and contributes to significant tension throughout the office. In addition to the tension generated by the Alec Baldwin visit to the office, there is continual tension between the office manager and the sales force. It is implied the office manager was hired for the position not necessarily due to his qualifications, but possibly due to who he is related to. It is pretty obvious he has never done any sales in his career as he has trouble relating to the sales force and does not seem to respect the jobs that they do. He is technically middle management and has continual problems as the owners Mitch & Murray have high expectations for sales figures and his office is not producing.

**Business Ethics Issues**

There are numerous ethical issues that are presented in the play. For the most part none of them are resolved by the end of the movie and the audience is left to assume the results of what happens at the end of the movie.

**Insubordination**

The economic environment creates tension in the office, but the relationship between the office manager and the sales agents does not make the environment any better. Spacey does not have much by the way of street smarts which winds up costing Al Pacino a major sale. The salesmen do not respect Spacey’s authority and Spacey does not seem to value the experience of the salesmen. The movie is maybe 8-10 acts long and each one involving Kevin Spacey and any number of the salesmen results in name calling and swearing generally aimed at Spacey.

**Lying to customers**

As the value of the property is generally suspect at best and the tension and incentives to sell at all costs is developed, some rather interesting angles are used to try and sell to potential investors. They
generally make initial contact with the investors over the phone and have some made up story with which they attempt to make the investors in a hurry to meet with them. One salesman started each call with the premise that the investor won a prize and he needed to meet with them very soon so he could inform them what they needed to do to claim the prize. Another claimed to be the president of a property management firm and wanted to meet with them to show them the deal he could give them on property, but the catch was that he was only in town for less than a day and had to meet with them in a hurry.

Closing deals at the bar

Al Pacino befriends a patron at the bar across the street from the office and winds up spending much of the evening with him. He is charming and strikes a chord with the patron who is in a mid-life crisis time of his life. Pacino winds up using his charm and the consumption of liquor to entice the man into buying property from him.

Blackmail

After unsuccessful sales visits with customers, Ed Harris and Alan Arkin wind up in a bar discussing their situation, the stress and tension of having to sell old and worthless leads, and how they detest the competition to save their jobs. They start to discuss the possibility of stealing the leads and selling them to a competitor. Harris knowing he would be the likely suspect if they were to disappear so he attempts to blackmail Arkin into breaking into the office to steal the leads.

Theft

After numerous unsuccessful attempts by the sales agents to entice the office manager into sharing some of the new leads with them, one of the agents takes matters into their own hands and breaks into the office manager’s office and steals the premium leads. It is implied that they then sold them to a competitor.

Ethical dilemma details
Each of the sales brokers turned to some form of lying to customers in order to make a sale. In the case of Lemmon and Arkin their whole spiel to the potential investors is a lie. They make up stories and situations in the hopes to generate a sense of urgency that the investors will meet with them and make a fast decision. They are either just in town for the night or the customer needs to meet with them shortly to claim their prize. The next day Pacino and Lemmon start a series of lies with one of Pacino’s clients in the efforts to keep the client from meeting with Pacino. The purpose of their lie is so the customer does not get the chance to back out of his investment deal with Pacino. Much of this lying comes from the fact that they are selling poor property. They have to create a sense of urgency and false sense of value of the properties in order to have any chance to sell them. In the end this activity did not get resolved, but the behavior of the sales brokers was more due to the assets they were trying to sell. Had they been selling better property they possibly would not have had to resort to such tactics.

Realizing his leads were worthless and old and knowing he was in jeopardy of coming in last place and losing his job, Jack Lemmon turns to bribery of the office manager to promise a cut of his commission in order to get a couple of the premium leads the office manager is keeping from them. The office manager indulges him and counteroffers a cut of Lemmon’s commission and a certain amount of money up front for each of the leads. The deal is proposed and negotiated in an alley behind the office which is probably appropriate because as the saying goes that is where most shady deals occur. The deal falls through when the office manager demands the money up front before he will go back into the office to get the leads. Jack Lemmon does not have the cash necessary to buy them and Kevin Spacey is not willing to take less than what he demanded so their deal falls through. Whether it was right or wrong to withhold the premium leads, the office manager ethically should not have entertained the bribery offer from Jack Lemmon. In the end it seemed Kevin Spacey knew he was wrong and wound up backing out from the deal. Jack Lemmon did not have the required $100 to pay him on the spot, but he offered him $30 today and the balance of the money the next day. It seemed Spacey knew it was wrong
and he answered he “couldn’t” and not a direct “no.” It is hard to expect someone would necessarily have $100 on them so it seemed like he may have come to his senses regarding the deal and decided it was not a good idea.

The owner of the office and the office manager hold out new and promising leads from the sales brokers either in the hope that they will fail, or prove themselves to be worthy salesmen before they will give any of the new leads out. The owners buy leads from magazines, mail-in contests, and likely other varied sources to provide the sales force with a potential customer. During the Alec Baldwin “pep talk” he turns over to the office manager this stack of “premium leads” that he tells the salesmen they cannot have until they prove they are worthy to receive them. So instead of these premium leads the sales force is given leads that are old and recycled for them to attempt to sell. One lead that is given to Jack Lemmon he winds up selling some investment property to the husband and wife only to have the office manager (Spacey) inform him that the couple are crazy and the check he received from them was worthless. This holding out of leads lends me to believe that the owners almost wanted the office and sales force to fail or the “premium” leads were worthless and just a ploy to light a fire under the salesmen. The issue was resolved as one of the salesmen broke into the office overnight and stole the premium leads. The holding out of leads from the agents only made their jobs more difficult and built up more animosity and tension in the office. The ethical issue I had with this practice was that the nature of management is to provide an environment with which employees can thrive and make money. In the end, not providing decent leads to employees did nothing to help the organization make money.

Reference