

ETHICS

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Measurement requires the highest level of ethical integrity in an industry that relies on ethical integrity at every level. A measurement professional is the provider of data to all the other professionals involved in the petroleum industry. If the measurement professional fails at their assigned duties, all the other branches of this industry make decisions based on poor data, or, in the worst case, false data.

Ethics, Morals, and Habits

Nomenclature

The problem with the words ethics and morals is that they are generally interchangeable. Admittedly there are subtleties in their use and connotation but generally they both mean a system of standards for good and evil, right and wrong, and the condition of being in harmony or disharmony with them (ethical, unethical, moral, immoral).

In the study of ethics we need a common set of definitions..

Ethics is a system of rules for behavior. As such, every individual, group, or subgroup has ethics. It represents the individuals' choices for their behavior or, for a group or subgroup, an agreed upon set of rules for behavior. Implied in this is that the individuals over themselves, or the group or subgroup over its members or those under its authority, have the right to enforce those rules.

So this means that there are different ethics.

- Personal Ethics – Your personal system of rules for behavior, your definitions of right and wrong and your rules to live by. The only enforcement medium is you.
- Civil Ethics – The Law. A set of rules which in the United States take the form of legislation, court rulings, and executive orders. The enforcement is in the form of civil punishments. An important aside here is that ethics can change. What is “right” one day can be “wrong” the next when a change of the law occurs.
- Professional Ethics – These are rules of behavior and practice set by a profession such as law, medicine, and engineering. The enforcement comes in two categories. Some, such as the above three and others, have the power to discipline because they are recognized and sanctioned by law, which moves their authority under the purview of Civil Ethics. Otherwise, the profession may enforce their ethics by refusal to do business with the offender or work with that offender such that they function at disadvantage.
- Religious Ethics – The set of rules for behavior set by a religion. Depending on the sect there may or may not be an enforcement method. Religious wars are basically the result of one religion deciding to extend their set of rules to another group of people.
- Social Ethics – These are rules of behavior set by any group or subgroup regarding the behavior of their members. Enforcement is generally limited to exclusion from the group.

With the exception of Civil and Professional Ethics, the other ethics may or may not be formally written. Personal Ethics are generally never written.

Morals are the extent to which one behaves in accordance with the ethics. A very old, and no longer politically correct, example is “An ethical man knows not to cheat on his wife. A moral man is faithful to his wife.” Morals are one's choice of behavior. It is available for a person to know the difference between right and wrong, and then choose to do wrong.

Habits are the way we conduct ourselves day to day. These behaviors are set by repetition. This is the way I did it last time, this is the way I will do it now. These behaviors are often either unconscious or typified by a lack of thought prior to the action. So an individual can do something “wrong” and even thought they acknowledge that it is “wrong”, having done it in the past, simply do it again. In literature this has many euphemisms: jaded, a calloused soul, “conscience seared with a hot iron”. All of these imply that in the repetition a moral numbness sets in that relieves the individual of the consequences of personal ethics relative to the deed. So we have good habits, virtues, and bad habits that shape our behavior. Habits rather than ethics and morals become the controlling factor in our behavior.

What represents an ethical problem?

An ethical dilemma exists whenever there is a real negative consequence to the individual for doing the ethical thing. It may be that it will cost you money or time or prestige or a promotion or your job or some other benefit that you hold valuable. In all cases, the correct thing to do is the ethical thing. It is that simple. But it is not necessarily easy.

Bribery is the taking of some benefit to you to perform your job improperly. Companies often provide small benefits to prospective clients such as meals, free training, and participation in social or sporting events at the company's expense. If business is discussed at these events AND the recipient does not modify their choice of vendor based on the receipt of the event or item rather than what is best for their employer or client, then it is not a bribe. Here are some simple examples. A set of golf clubs has nothing to do with the quality of a vendor's product and is a bribe. Tickets to a sporting or social event at which a representative of the vendor is **NOT** present is a bribe as there was no business associated with the event. Some companies have set dollar value limits on gifts from vendors. If one receives an offer that may constitute a bribe their first duty is to report the offer to their superior or client. For reasons will be discussed later in this paper, make that report quickly and in writing.

A conflict of interest exists when an individual's decision can benefit themselves or others associated with them. If your near friend or relative has bid on a contract the awarding of which you control, that represents a conflict of interest. If you discover there is a conflict of interest, quickly report it to your superior or client. Having a conflict of interest is not an unethical situation, how the conflict of interest is resolved can represent an unethical action.

Many companies and almost all government agencies are concerned about "Inappropriate Behavior". Inappropriate Behavior is any action or event that does not necessarily represent a violation of ethics, but could cause a question to be raised as to the ethical behavior of an individual. In general, representatives of regulatory bodies are prohibited from taking anything from a company they have authority over.

There are tests that have been proposed to help individual decide if a decision is unethical or inappropriate.

What would a reasonable person think?

Are my actions going to be considered unethical? Could they be interpreted as inappropriate?

The "Smell" Test (Does this stink?)

"How would this look to my harshest critic?"

"How would this look on the front page of the newspaper?"

"If I have a doubt in my mind, will there also be a doubt in my client's?"

The Concept of Betrayal

Is the public being betrayed, your boss, or your client?

Responses to an Ethical Problem

Avoid snap judgments. Often people panic when they perceive that an ethical issue has arisen. This can be especially true when the benefit is in the form of a threat. Take time to breath and think.

Ethics is simple problem solving. We solve problems every day. Finding oneself in an ethical dilemma is a problem and nothing more. What are the consequences of doing the ethical thing? Is there a way to completely avoid the consequences or at least mitigate them? Often a very logical first step is to get an attorney.

Consider the truth and disclosure. Disclosing an ethical dilemma to your superior or client may resolve the issue immediately. If not, the direction of your superior or client will remove the ethical burden from you. Caveat: If your superior or client is the source of your ethical dilemma, go above them or find a new job.

Here is your author's rule of thumb: "Tell the truth, take the hit, move on."

Use the Window of Opportunity. "That which thou do, do quickly." If any unethical dilemma you are in is discovered by your superior or client before you inform them of it, their assumption will be that you were trying to cover it up.

A check up from the neck up.

Habits are dangerous things. The sense of unethical behavior has been lost in repetition. Everyone should take the time to examine behaviors that are in conflict with their ethics.

At a personal level, often how one treats their spouse, children, parents does not match how they want to treat them. Their responses are based on habit rather than the care and compassion they want to show.

Measurement wise, consider a meter report. If one has inspected a meter run a dozen times, how likely does he or she change the date on the pervious report and modify the few fields that change monthly? There are dozens more fields on that report form. Diligence requires that those fields be correct as well. Filing the report implies they are correct.

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