

# IEEE support of ethical engineers in professional, employment jeopardy

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**T**he IEEE is at a crossroads in matters of rendering ethical support (i.e. legal, financial, publicity, etc.) to its members. When a member requests such support, upon being placed in ethical jeopardy in his or her career for attempting to uphold the Code of Ethics, what will the IEEE do in the future? Will it go forward to perform as an independent professional institute, free from external corporate concerns and influences, as its current policy says it will, and offer support to its members when they are placed in professional or employment jeopardy?

IEEE's Constitution states "The IEEE shall strive to enhance the quality of life for all people throughout the world through the constructive application of technology in its fields of competence." Further, upon accepting and signing the IEEE's membership card each year, each member agrees to the statement that "All members of the IEEE shall be governed by IEEE's Constitution, Bylaws, Statement of Policies and Procedures and Code of Ethics."

**AGAINST THE GRAIN.** As a professional, in carrying out these objectives, the engineer is suppose to exercise independent professional judgment in protecting the public's safety, welfare, environment, etc., in his or her practice. What happens when an engineer's professional judgment goes against his or her client's or employer's views and places them in employment ethical jeopardy?

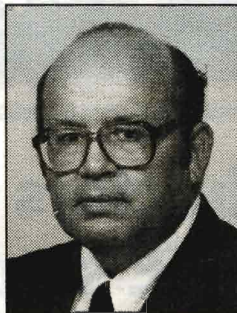
Since 1976, IEEE Policy 7.8 has stated that "members who are placed in jeopardy as a consequence of adherence to the Institute's Code of Ethics may be offered assistance, provided that in the opinion of the Board of Directors or its designated representative such assistance is warranted."

The Ethics Committee has operated an Ethics Hotline (ph: 1-732-562-6590) since August 1996 which members may contact for information about ethical matters, interpretation of the Code of Ethics or guidance on how they may request ethical support in matters where adherence to the code has placed their employment in jeopardy.

The Member Conduct Committee, under IEEE Policy 7.12, is empowered to receive such formal requests for ethical support, on the basis that the member's adherence to the code may have affected the member's employment or professional activities, and then conducts investigations and issues a report on the preliminary investigation to the IEEE Executive Committee with its findings and recommendations.

**INCREASING ANXIETY.** The author is seeing increasing anxiety on the part of some IEEE

members over its involvement in such ethical support matters, in the increase in members' requests for support and in the operation of the Ethics Hotline. Those who have shown this anxiety recognize that within IEEE's ranks there are numerous employers, managers, executives and administrators of engineers, and that many of their companies or owners make up customers for IEEE services and products.



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What, then, is the IEEE, and what should its policy be when its members are placed in employment jeopardy for upholding the IEEE Code of Ethics? The IEEE is a professional society, comprised of individual engineers ranging from entry-level positions up to owners and executives of companies, government and institutions of education, among other kinds. One condition of membership in the IEEE is adherence to its Code of

Ethics. This is to be performed as a personal responsibility which requires the exercise of independent professional judgment on the part of each engineer, free from coercion or harassment.

**QUESTIONS.** If this is so for the individual engineer member, should the IEEE as a whole be an institute independent in its operations and decision making from outside corporate, academic or governmental influences? Should members pay IEEE dues and Professional Engineering license fees out of their personal resources and not rely on his or her employer? These are a few of the ethical questions before the IEEE membership.

While the answers to such questions continue to be a subject of debate, the Ethics Committee believes that IEEE leaders should strive to remain free from influence or pressure from outside interest groups in their decision making when acting in an official IEEE capacity, and to consider support for ethical engineering conduct. Likewise, the committee feels that the IEEE should continue its 21-year-old policy to "render ethical support to its members who are placed in employment or professional jeopardy for practicing to uphold the IEEE Code of Ethics."

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The committee maintains a World Wide Web home page at "http://www.ieee.org/committee/ethics".