ethics

IEEE ethics: A personal view of the lessons and challenges

BY R.S. LARSEN
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I want to discuss IEEE ethics from the perspective of three years of service on the "new" IEEE Ethics Committee.

The organization and charter of the relatively new transnational version of the Ethics Committee (EC), and its companion committee, the Member Conduct Committee (MCC), can be found linked to the IEEE's Web home page (www.ieee.org) under "And much more ...".

Briefly, the new committee began operations in 1995 with six appointed members, three from the U.S. and three from abroad. The EC's main role is an advisory to the IEEE Board of Directors on all ethics matters; matters of member discipline or support are vested in the MCC.

ETHICS AGENDA. The new EC defined its role in terms of developing a proactive ethics agenda for the IEEE.

Broadly, it sought to :

(1) promulgate the IEEE Code of Ethics by having the code sent with the annual dues notice, and establishing a Web site;

(2) educate through a bimonthly column in THE INSTITUTE, featuring real examples and various EC members' perspectives;

(3) collaborate by linking with organizations seeking to promote ethics among engineers and scientists and their employers; and

(4) develop modes of ethics support.

I personally worked mostly on items **(2)** and **(4)**. Under **(2)**, I wrote columns and opinions, and most recently delivered a videotaped lecture to engineering students at North Carolina State University as part of an IEEE series on professionalism. The lecture, "Ethical Challenges in the Engineering Professions," covered a broad range of ethical issues of interest to engineers. (For more information, e-mail Troy Nagle, 1994 IEEE president, at "t.nagle@ncsu.edu".)

A large effort was directed at item **(4)**, developing modes of response for members. The committee saw evidence of need for support of people caught in professional ethical dilemmas. Problem cases were known to members of the EC; moreover, wide promulgation of the IEEE Ethics Code was felt by the EC as pressure to move in this direction.

Although the EC realized that member support was vested in MCC, the latter had been inactive in promoting itself in this area, so the EC felt free to suggest new initiatives to the IEEE Board of Directors. In 1996 the Board gave its approval to the IEEE Ethics Hotline.

The hotline's announced purpose was to develop a referral service for members. It operated successfully for a year, during which time several dozen calls were received, a dozen of which involved clear ethical dilemmas.

Some situations concerned the workplace. Others concerned the IEEE itself, in areas such as publications and standards: plagiarism, peer review conflict of interest, a student having thesis work published by his academic advisor in an IEEE journal without the student's name, etc.

I personally handled about half of these cases. The identity of callers was protected,

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and a standard disclaimer was made that I was a volunteer, not a trained counselor or legal representative.

The most serious problems involved situations where a member had been fired over obvious ethical conflicts. For example, a member disclosing that a major new product contained embedded software owned by another company; a member reporting to higher management the falsification of semiconductor test data; and a member demanding recall of an infant medical device found to have a life-threatening safety problem.

The hotline taught us the following lessons:

♦ The need for support is real. A member suffering job loss for ethical behavior is untrained in what to do, is likely to make basic mistakes early that make future legal help ineffective or impossible, and needs to know early how to protect himself or herself.

♦ Pro bono (contingency fee) legal help is essentially unavailable to an engineer. Lawyers will not work on a contingency fee for the relatively small rewards possible through settlement of a case based on unfair job termination.

♦ More such problems exist among the members than some might believe. Only a handful of these were helped through the hotline, because referrals are difficult and IEEE resources are few; but the hotline was an important morale booster to callers.

♦ The average caller was highly principled, sincere, diligent and a very capable engineer, who was finding himself or herself in this type of situation for the first time in their career and was looking for support.

♦ A conflict resolution service would be effective in mediating employee-employer problems before blowup occurred. Merely having IEEE involved, even at arm's length, would be invaluable in preventing termination over ethics disputes.

In late 1997, the hotline was terminated by the IEEE Executive Committee over concerns about legal liabilities. The Ethics Committee and a special review committee both argued that this concern was minimal based on examples of similar existing operations, but to no avail.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE? The reversal by ExCom of the Board's decision to establish the hotline a year earlier indicates that the ExCom, the Board and the EC will be called to reach new understandings as they move forward. Ethics support, in my view, is vital to IEEE. Overall the IEEE Ethics Committee has made significant progress in promulgating, educating and developing ethics awareness and support within the IEEE.

Moreover, as a unique transnational engineering society serving a global public, IEEE is positioned to play a defining role in advancing professional ethics globally. This worthy task will demand IEEE's best minds, and should be undertaken with enthusiasm.

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