

# A reflection on the IEEE's readiness to support ethics in the 21st century

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**A**s we approach the beginning of the 21st century, I feel it is appropriate for us to take some time out, pause, reflect, and try to self-assess how well the IEEE is positioned for the next millennium to support its members in their attempts to practice ethically. So, to assist in performing this, here are some questions to consider:

1. Has IEEE done enough, too much, or not enough?

2. Should it become more proactive? Rather than be passive, it could look for and propose programs or services that would promote good ethical practice, discuss hypothetical ethics cases, and become more visible.

3. Should it try to assist in the early stages of ethical conflicts? Some form of ethical conflict resolution service, expert advice or third-party review could be provided to help avoid situations leading to formal charges.

4. On the other hand, should the IEEE just wait and react once an ethical matter has progressed to the point where either a charge of unethical conduct has been made or a request for ethical support has been made formally to the Member Conduct Committee to investigate?

5. Should the IEEE reinstitute its Ethics Information Line (phone, fax, Web), first established in August 1996, then terminated just one year later over fears of liability exposure?

6. Should it establish some type of support fund, based upon voluntary contributions, to provide upfront help to those whom, because they adhered to the IEEE Ethics Code, require legal assistance or emergency grants or loans to help with urgent expenses, such as mortgage payments?

7. Should the IEEE get involved in disputes where ethical principles and interpretations are involved? (Excluding all collective bargaining types of matters.) If so, how?

8. Should the IEEE continue with two committees, both dealing with ethical matters, or combine them into one? Currently, IEEE has an Ethics Committee and a Member Conduct Committee.

9. In many countries outside the U.S., one has to be a licensed professional engineer to practice engineering. How should the IEEE handle ethical complaint cases against members residing in these countries? Should they be referred instead to their respective national licensing organization?

10. What else should the IEEE do to support good professional ethical practices as we move into the 21st century?

I invite IEEE members to send in their answers to these questions. They will be assembled and results forwarded to the IEEE Board of Directors for consideration and published in a future Ethics Column in THE INSTITUTE.

You may e-mail responses to me at "w.elden@ieee.org" or snail mail them to IEEE Member Conduct Committee, Corporate Activities, 445 Hoes Lane, P.O. Box 1331, Piscataway, NJ 08855-1331.

In trying to answer these questions, here are current key statements of IEEE ethical

purpose and policy to measure them against.

The IEEE Constitution says the following in Article I, Section 2:

"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. It shall endeavor to promote understanding of the influence of such technology on the public welfare."

IEEE Bylaw I-113, states the following under "4. Requests for Support.":

"The IEEE may offer support to engineers and scientists involved in matters of ethical principle that stem in whole or in part from adherence to the principles embodied in the IEEE Code of Ethics, and that can jeopardize a person's livelihood, can compromise the discharge of the person's professional responsibilities, or that can be detrimental to the interests of IEEE or of the engineering profession."

IEEE Policy and Procedure 7.9, states the following on "Matters of Ethical Principle":

"A. The Executive Committee is empowered by the Board of Directors to enter an amicus curiae brief in any court in the U.S.A. or in cooperation with cognizant national societies in other countries where a member of the profession is involved as a consequence of his taking a position on a matter of ethical principle.

"B. The Executive Committee is empowered to publicize actions described in paragraph A in any fashion deemed suitable and appropriate."

IEEE Policy and Procedure 7.10, under "IEEE Involvement in Matters of Ethical Conduct," reads:

"A. Infractions of the Institute's Code of Ethics by members,

when reported to and investigated and evaluated by the Board of Directors, or its designated representative, are subject to appropriate action by the Institute's Board of Directors on the basis of procedures established by that body.

"B. 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."

Finally, IEEE's Code of Ethics says that members must commit themselves to 10 basic ethical principles.

Principle No. 10 states: "to assist colleagues and co-workers in their professional development and to support them in following this code of ethics."

The MCC currently operates its own Web page at "www.ieee.org/committee/mcc", where its governing bylaws and the policy and procedure statements can be found.

The MCC may be reached by sending an e-mail message to "mcc@ieee.org" or by telephoning 732-562-3933.



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## CONTACT

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