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

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As 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 ethics. 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 engineering? How should the IEEE 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 work to clarify what constitutes an ethical matter, and where to place the point where either a charge of unethical conduct has been made or a request for ethical support has been made from a Member Conduct Committee to investigate?

5. Should the IEEE reconstitute its Ethics Information Line (phone, fax, Web) as 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 assistance 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, please.)
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 those countries? They should be referred instead to their respective national licensing organization.

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 representatives, are subject to appropriate action by the Institute's Board of Directors on the basis of procedures established by that body."

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

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

"A. Members who 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 reasonably be seen as supportive of the Institute, can compromise the discharge of the person's professional responsibilities, or that can be detrimental to the interests of IEEE or of the member's advancement in 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."

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