

Sweating the small stuff

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When it comes to ethics, one may indeed need to sweat the small stuff despite recent admonitions to do otherwise. Two examples from recent Ethics Committee activities come to mind.

The first stems from my involvement, on behalf of the IEEE, with the American Association of Engineering Societies (AAES). As the name implies, AAES is an umbrella organization whose members consist of US-based engineering societies, ranging from the big and obvious, such as the IEEE, and the small and not so obvious such as the Society of Fire Protection Engineers. Under the leadership of Martha Sloan (an IEEE Past President), AAES formed an ad hoc group, of which I was the IEEE representative, to try to forge a common model code of ethics. Our work has been based on the presumption that, for example, an electrical engineer's definition of ethical behavior should not differ from that of a mechanical engineer. As an aside, one might argue that all professionals — doctors, lawyers, even physicists — should work by a common code of ethics, but this may be asking too much!

Our AAES ethics group has been working since last summer to come up with a set of 10 universal canons which could be supported, as appropriate, by society — specific guidelines, with examples keyed to each canon. As we struggled, we came to appreciate that Moses did not have to deal with a committee! Clearly, one of the essential canons had to reflect the concept that engineers should be fair in all their dealings. (Shouldn't everyone?!) This seems simple enough, doesn't it? To come up with words to express the concept, we examined existing codes from many of the member societies. Typical is the IEEE's which contains the statement that "Members of IEEE ... agree to treat fairly all persons regardless of such factors as race, religion, gender, disability, age or national origin." Such a statement follows along the lines of typical legal proscriptions against discrimination. But then the debate began. Are there other factors that ought to be mentioned explicitly — such as sexual preference? Or are we covered by the use of such escape clauses as "such factors as?"

Eventually, one of the group members reminded us that there is a well-known prototype for a code of ethics which suggested that the shortest path to inclusivity is brevity. We took that path and the words we're suggesting are: "Engineers shall treat fairly

all persons." With this simple, overarching principle in place, we must then be sure we provide rich, exemplary guidelines to help engineers behave ethically on a case-by-case basis. Does anyone have a better suggestion?

The second example comes from a request that came to the IEEE Ethics Committee from the Regional Activities Board to review the continued use of IEEE letterhead and business cards by IEEE officers who have completed their term. The issue, as presented, seemed straightforward, even trivial:

Suppose, for example, that the past president of an IEEE society had a pile of leftover IEEE stationery and business cards indi-

cating the presidential office. Further suppose that the past president remained active in IEEE affairs. It seems clear that it would be unethical to continue to use that stationery, as is, since the past president would be pretending to be someone he/she was not. But suppose the past president were to cross out the word "President," or to pencil in the prefix "ex" or the word "past" in front of "President." Would continued use then still be unethical? The alternative, presumably, would be to consign the letterhead to scrap paper, or use it to line the bottom of the bird cage. The committee concluded that the use of marked-up stationery, on legitimate IEEE business, was not unethical but certainly tacky, and was to be discouraged.

But in examining this seemingly trivial concern, a bigger-picture ethical issue emerges: The obligation of all of us to protect the professional image of the IEEE (and our own integrity) by not misusing our IEEE affiliation. It would be clearly unethical for me, for example, to write a letter on IEEE letterhead to the local newspaper endorsing a particular candidate for the school board, implying an IEEE endorsement that's not there.

But suppose I'm out walking my dog and I meet a casual friend who comments on how well trained the dog is and asks for a recommendation on a trainer. I ask him to call me later and give him my IEEE business card. Am I misusing my IEEE connection, or is my action incidental and harmless? Probably the latter, in this case.

As in most ethical issues, the use (or misuse) of our IEEE connection can span a complete spectrum from the criminally fraudulent to the trivially innocent. How does one draw the line? In my view the answer lies not in endless pages of Policies and Procedures, but in the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid).

The IEEE Ethics Committee maintains a Web site at "www.ieee.org/committee/ethics".



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