

Ethics: a personal commitment and responsibility

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2000 IEEE Ethics Committee Chairman

One dictionary definition describes ethics rather abstractly as "the study of the general nature of morals and of the specific moral choices to be made by the individual in his or her relationship with others." Another perhaps more concise definition — and one more closely aligned to the IEEE's purposes — states that ethics are "the rules or standards governing the conduct of the members of a profession."

But it is one thing to define ethics and quite another to write effective rules, standards or guidelines for proper ethical behavior. It becomes even more difficult to introduce, where applicable, penalties for non-compliance to those rules.

Because our technologies are so pervasive in society, ethical issues come to our attention which, in order to resolve, would require a certain amount of confrontational action with other institutions. Finally, the IEEE is a worldwide organization embracing many different cultures, not all of which would necessarily agree with every approach we might wish to pursue.

The IEEE has established a middle ground policy on ethics and while it may not fit every member's desire for a more proactive approach, it does strike the right note, on what our organization expects of its members. It does require the individual member to take charge of his or her conduct under these guidelines, hence this article's title.

Unfortunately, most of our members are unaware of the role of the Ethics Committee, and for that reason we have redrafted our Vision and Mission Statements in the proper context of our current mandate, emphasizing the limits on our activities.

VISION: A world in which engineers and scientists are respected for their exemplary ethical behavior, and the IEEE and its Ethics Committee are recognized as major drivers in this regard.

MISSION: The Ethics Committee advises the Board of Directors on ethics policy and concerns, as well as fostering awareness on ethical issues and promoting ethical behavior amongst individuals and organizations working within the IEEE fields of interest.

LIMITS: The IEEE Ethics Committee will not be involved in the processing of personal complaints or in providing advice to individuals. Other resources, both inside and outside of the IEEE, are available to individuals upon request.

Our primary role is to define what constitutes ethical behavior and promote adherence to those principles among our members. The Code of Ethics is our statement of what is expected from members. We do not police compliance to our guidelines nor do we impose discipline on those that might not follow them.

With respect to advisory services for individual members, we can only point them in the direction of other institutions that may be in a position to assist. It is important that our members are fully aware of this role.

There is confusion sometimes between the Ethics Committee's mandate and that of another committee within the IEEE responsible for member discipline.

The Member Conduct Committee has a formal procedure for dealing with such situations. It is a separate committee that provides an avenue to settle member-to-member complaints. Any conclusions they reach are referred directly to the IEEE Board of Directors along with a recommendation for discipline, if deemed necessary.

The Ethics Committee has responded to 24 inquiries in 2000, and we expect to deal with at least another six by January. I expect this level of activity will prevail throughout 2001.

Our only plea to members is to recognize the scope and limitations of our committee's activities and understand that all requests may not receive the positive answers they may have expected.