ethics

Reflections — and the future

BY GERALD L. ENGEL
1995-96 Chair, IEEE Ethics Committee

I t is tradition for the past chair of an organization to reflect on the progress that was made during his term and to acknowledge the efforts of others in achieving success.

The Ethics Committee is no exception. It was with great pride in a significant number of important, successfully completed projects that I turned over the chair to Steve Unger in January.

The Ethics Committee came into existence in January 1995, when the ethics function became a global priority for the Institute following a number of years as an activity of the United States Activities Board. The charge to the committee was as follows:

"It shall serve as advisor to the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee on the ethical posture of

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the Institute and on programs for serving the ethical interests and concerns of the members."

This charge has been met in a number of ways. A home page for the Ethics Committee has been installed on the World Wide Web. It is the intent of this effort to provide better access to the work of the committee and to communicate with the IEEE membership. Included with the information regarding the committee are pointers to ethics references on the Web; pointers to a variety of codes of professional conduct and ethics; and pointers to appropriate organizations and conferences.

TAKING UP ISSUES. The committee has brought several issues of ethical concern to the IEEE Board of Directors. These issues involved inconsistencies that existed, or appeared to exist, in the Institute structure, and once identified were quickly remedied.

The committee maintained regular communications with the membership via this bimonthly column in THE INSTITUTE. The column has been authored by members and resource members of the committee, and has resulted in the identification of several individuals who have become involved with the committee.

In November 1996 the Ethics Committee adopted guidelines to assist the individual who dissents on ethical grounds. This report, available through the committee's Web site, provides step-by-step guidance to assist the individual who is placed in a potentially difficult situation by following the IEEE Code of Ethics.

In August 1996 the committee implemented an IEEE Ethics Hotline (telephone: 1-908-562-6590). The purpose of the project was to provide immediate feedback to individuals seeking information regarding ethics

related issues. A number of the inquiries that came to the hotline were reviewed in this column in the April 1997 issue. Of perhaps greatest significance is the fact that each of these represented a real problem for an individual, and the hotline provided an opportunity to explore at least some of the options that were available.

LOOK TO THE FUTURE. As the committee looks to the future, several issues are under consideration. The presence of the Ethics Hotline has already shown that there may be a need for more direct forms of support for members who have encountered ethical dilemmas. The committee will be looking for ways in which some form of a support fund can be implemented by the Institute to provide support, where necessary, when someone is jeopardized by following the IEEE Code of Ethics. The committee will continue to address the global nature of ethical issues. Questions have been raised regarding the applicability of a document like the IEEE Code of Ethics in an international organization where local customs may present conflicts. These questions will be addressed and issues that emerge will be clarified. The committee will also consider appropriate educational resources in support of ethical issues and questions. Both the Engineering Accreditation Commission of ABET, and the Computer Science Accreditation Commission of CSAB require coverage of ethical issues in undergraduate programs. It would appear appropriate for the Institute, through the Ethics Committee, to suggest ways in which this can be done and, if appropriate, assist in supplying appropriate materials.

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Finally, I wish my successor, Steve Unger, every success in carrying on the work of this outstanding and critically important committee. I also encourage all those reading this column to communicate your thoughts and ideas to the Ethics Committee.

Send suggestions or comments for the Ethics Committee to Cathy Downer, IEEE Ethics Committee, 445 Hoes Lane, Piscataway, NJ, USA 08855-1331; e-mail "ethics@ieee.org"; telephone 1-908-562-6590; fax 1-908-562-9515.

The committee maintains a World Wide Web home page at "http://www.ieee.org/committee/ethics".