Professionalism and Ethical Behavior in Construction Practice

Jeffrey S. Russell, Ph.D., P.E.
Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering
Vice Provost for Lifelong Learning
Dean of Continuing Studies

University of Wisconsin–Madison
Today’s talk

• Definitions
• Data
• Decisions
• Practical applications
Key questions

- Does ethical practice really matter?
- What is the cost and impact of unethical behaviors?
- How does my organization address ethics?
- How is my ethical role modeling?
- Is it my job to make sure my employees are exhibiting ethical behavior?
Examples to motivate our topic
Defining morality
Philosophical perspective

- Defining the nature of our moral duty
- The good life: self interest and desire theory
- Natural law
- Consequentialism
- Religious
- Utilitarian
Defining ethics
Values: practical definition

Ethical, preference, stated, and operational
How do you define ethics?
Ethics: practical definition

• The process used to make “value-laden” decisions beyond the law in professional matters.

• Ethics involves doing the right thing even when it costs more than you want to pay. It is what we should do.
Ethics and the law

Ethical

Illegal

Unethical

Legal

4

1

2

1
Construction Industry Compared to U.S. Average

- Retaliation: Construction 37%, U.S. Average 22%
- Reported: Construction 74%, U.S. Average 65%
- Misconduct: Construction 53%, U.S. Average 48%
- Pressure: Construction 18%, U.S. Average 13%
Considerations before making a decision

- Financial
- Political
- Supervisor, client
- Personal, professional
Considerations before making a decision

- Consult professional ethics codes
- Consult mentors and experienced colleagues
- Think proactively, talk through your options with team members & colleagues
- Consider impact on others
Pressures and decision-making

Power

Pressures

Behavior
Pressures by intensity

- Adhering to a project timeline
- Trying to keep a project on budget
- Meeting your personal financial obligations
- Ensuring the financial stability and success of your company
- Keeping your job
- Wanting to make your boss look good
- Advancing your career
- Committing safety violations
- Ignoring wrongdoing you witness
- Violating the law
EMPLOYEES WHO FEEL PRESSURE ARE FAR MORE LIKELY TO OBSERVE MISCONDUCT

- **55%** Did NOT Feel Pressure
- **45%** Felt Pressure to Compromise Standards

Legend:
- Green: Did NOT Observe Misconduct in the Past 12 Months
- Red: Observed Misconduct in the Past 12 Months

- **6%**
- **94%**
Context matters
Cognitive blindness

Listen to NPR’s Psychology of Fraud: Why Good People Do Bad Things

http://www.npr.org/2012/05/01/151764534/psychology-of-fraud-why-good-people-do-bad-things
“Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act but a habit.” ~Aristotle
Practical applications: leaders, managers and supervisors

- Ambiguity vs. clarity
- Conflicting messages vs. clear leadership
- Ends vs. means
Practical suggestions: leaders, managers & supervisors

Organizational culture

Role-modeling

Talk the talk, walk the walk

Encourage dialogue
Practical applications: individuals

- Would vs. should
- Want vs. should
- Consider consequences
A practical conclusion

Remember:

• We judge ourselves by our best intentions, most noble acts, most virtuous habits, and we are judged by our worst last act(s).

• Treat people based upon who you are, not who they are or how they act.
Questions & Comments?

Contact me:

jeffrey.russell@wisc.edu

Thank you!
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Ethics Research Center

www.ethics.org
Essentials of Business Ethics
The Fundamentals of Ethics
The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty

RSA Animate - The Truth About Dishonesty, feat. Dan Ariely
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBmJay_qdNc
Cognitive blindness

Listen to NPR’s Psychology of Fraud: Why Good People Do Bad Things

http://www.npr.org/2012/05/01/151764534/psychology-of-fraud-why-good-people-do-bad-things
A practical consideration

How hard would it be to program our website to collect browser history from our visitors?

Well, first I'd need to invent some sort of device that reverses my sense of right and wrong.

So... are we talking about a week... or a month?
Ethics: theoretical definitions

- “Theory or system of moral values; guiding philosophy”
- “Ethical conduct is... behavior desired by society which is above and beyond the minimum standards established by law”
- “The study of moral decisions that must be made by engineers in the course of engineering practice”

Statue of Aristotle