

VALUE JUDGEMENTS

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It is not uncommon in a given situation for someone to remark that “the end justifies the means”. If we are party to the deliberation, we may even agree. Often however, it is this remark that sparks the beginning of the ethical debate. To make a decision about ends (or goals) means making a judgment about the appropriateness and relative value of different goals that could be equally desirable. The judgement may further be complicated by the allocation of scarce resources with different opportunity costs required to achieve each possibility. Similarly, the selection of a means requires giving preference to a particular mean (or method) in preference to another that could be just as viable. We make our decisions, therefore, under conditions of uncertainty and, as such, they become value-laden in order to arrive at a choice. The decision, however, is not made in isolation and will frequently include further conflicts of value related to social, economic, political and environmental impacts that invariably impinge on human rights and a diversity of other vested interests.

Another issue we must confront is whether the decision is ours to make, or whether others are required to participate. However, whether the decision is ours alone, or whether it must be made in collaboration with others, we need to ask what guidelines or frameworks exist for the making of the decision?

The question is one of ethics. Ethics, however, is not a topic that can be approached lightly or without difficulty. We speak of personal ethics, work ethics, scientific ethics, religious ethics, legal ethics, medical ethics, business ethics, social ethics, bio-ethics - and so on, almost without end. From the nature of the association of the word, one may infer that ethics is a matter governed by context. The ethical issues a lawyer must face in advising a ruthless business man on how to structure a service contract, are not the same as those faced by a medical doctor who must decide on how best to apply limited state funds in a rural hospital, or even those of a scientist who must decide how far he should take his research for the benefit of humanity with methods that could violate the customs or values of society, the rights of the individual, or pose a threat to the surrounding ecology environment. Principles and frameworks are needed to ensure that decisions made in all these different situations are right. By right, I mean “right” in terms of the consequences of our actions and whether they are obligatory or non-obligatory.

Ethics has to do with morality, and it is this inherent characteristic that is possibly the most difficult obstacle to overcome. The reason is that everyone already has a concept of morality. Although, these concepts differ from person to person, or group to group, and over time. Notwithstanding this situation, people may still ask, “What standards can we

apply to the profession that we do not already know from the various moral authorities that have influenced our lives?" Or, they could ask, "What is so distinct about the workplace that there should now be a "change" of morality? The perspectives expressed by these questions, however, are limited. They are also prone to bias because, as I have already suggested, there is no real moral perception apart from particular contexts. The ethics standards of family, church and social relations are also not easily applied to the dynamics of professional practice; nor are they readily found in current ethical theory, moral custom, or even in the codes of other professions. The reason for this is that the issues on which professionals must make decisions in a particular field are often obscure and the options uncertain. Difficult situations, call for analysis in terms of clear, sound and objective principles which, preferably, have been developed to address the specific problems they face. This does not mean that we can entirely ignore the authorities on which our day to day ethics are based. A valid social philosophy must be grounded in a sound personal ethic informed by spiritual or rational values. As you may know, Aristotle taught very clearly that ethics and politics are complementary and, for this reason, work to the same end. It is this topic that gives rise to the necessity for Project Management South Africa (PMSA) to develop a new Code of Ethics to serve professional practice in the light of its imminent registration as a professional body with the South African Qualifications Authority. After registration, PMSA will be empowered to confer professional status on practicing project managers and administrators in all industries, and in the categories for which they qualify. (At present, it is only project managers in the built environment who are professionally registered, but this is done under different legislation as promulgated in 2004). The emphasis of a new Code of Ethics for the project management profession must provide a framework that is cognizant of their expertise and role in society. Thirty years ago few people would have regarded project managers as professionals, but today practitioners are held in high esteem for their knowledge and unique skills they bring to the management of multi-disciplinary teams in the accomplishment of strategic objectives, often undertaken in complex environments, and under conditions of severe resource constraints.

Formerly, the term 'professional' was assigned only to those persons whose occupations were traditionally regarded as 'learned' and who enjoyed intimate relationships with individual clients. I refer to the professions of law, medicine, architecture and the ministry. The persons who entered these professions in earlier times were also distinguished by social class. However, since the modern era (which began in the 16th Century), man has lived in a society that has been continuously shaped by the advance of scientific knowledge, industrialization, globalisation and, more recently, intricate technological innovation. These advancements have resulted in an increasing degree of specialisation where today, there are literally hundreds of occupations that maintain and continue to develop standards for professionalism which they require from their members. I speak of scientists (across a very wide range of occupations), accountants, auditors, scholars in academia, secretaries, teachers, engineers, business specialists, military officers, journalists, fashion designers, psychologists, psychotherapists, ecologists, public service officials, etc., to mention but a few. The list is almost without end. These occupations too are often characterised by lengthy periods of study followed by a period of formal indenture before professional status can be achieved. The claim of these occupations to professional status is thus based not only on the nature of their work but also on the organisational

structure of their profession. It would seem, therefore, that the term 'professional' can no longer be reserved merely to protect an age old view.

It should be borne in mind that professionals, in whatever line of work, occupy a strategic position in society and that they provide services not readily available from other quarters. Their services are highly valued and, as a consequence, professionals enjoy status, prestige and influence. Not least of which is the model they provide for the way that work should be done. Their standards are the occupational ideal for many non-professionals and will, no doubt, continue to be so with the spread of industrialisation to emerging economies, and with the proliferation of technologically based occupations. Development thus demands professionalism and, we could say, that its discipline advances the cause of development.

Professionals, however, make decisions that affect not only individuals, but large numbers of people and, often, without their consent. In some cases, these decisions impact on the sustainability of the environment. Decisions can also be coloured by patron loyalty or self-interest which can easily take priority over public interest. A code of ethics, therefore, should reflect a strong social and, where appropriate, environmental emphasis, that enhances the basis of accountability. In this sense, a code of ethics should set out the values that are at stake.

The final question is: "Who should be interested in the development of a new Code of Ethics for a nascent profession of project management in South Africa?" The answer to this question is based on the understanding that professionals in all spheres should be accountable to society for their decisions. As stated before in Part 1 on this topic as published in an earlier edition of the Project Manager, professions exist by means of social contract. Licencing of the professional in terms of legislation makes it so. The contract is based on the requirement for professionalism. Professionalism thus serves as a bridge between the interests of society and the practice of the profession. Under the contract, society (in its many forms) seeks from the professional a particular outcome. The outcome, however, is often required to be achieved under conditions that are very uncertain. To achieve this end, therefore, society grants the profession a level of autonomy in order to permit it the right to exercise its discretion about the means, the instruments and the actions necessary to produce the desired result. The profession does so, although not without checks and balances, and usually only after taking into account the likely consequences of the means, its alternatives, the costs, and obvious and remote effects. It is a fundamental mistake, however, to think that professionals are the sole authors of their own ethical principles. Professionals compose partnerships with their clients and employers in which all parties participate in the making of ethical decisions. For example, how many of us have not been involved in making a joint decision with a medical doctor on whether someone we love should undergo a high risk medical procedure, or be taken off a life support system. The issues that are brought to bear in such a situation seldom relate only to the medical facts. It includes the ethics that govern the situation in all its dimensions, and which apply to whoever is called upon to participate in such a decision. The principles on which they are based, therefore, should be formulated by everyone who has a share in the outcome. For this reason, all persons with a vested interest in the proper and successful functioning of a profession should have a say in the content of its Code of Ethics, whether government (as the overall representative of society), groups, corporate bodies, or even individuals.

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