

ETHICS IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

PETER E RICHARDS

Published in the Project Manager Issue 09 (June 2011), Cape Media, Cape Town
www.theprojectmanager.co.za

In giving our attention to this matter, we must not confuse our understanding of the subject with a personal study of morality undertaken through the lens of religion or culture, but rather as a rational secular inquiry. We have all been moulded by the former and the values we derived from our nurture already determine the manner, motivation and limits of our personal conduct in a given situation. That is who we are. Problems arise, however, when we take these values (whether strong or weak) and apply them indiscriminately to projects. Our decision-making will either be authoritarian or arbitrary, and the result is likely to impact negatively on project outcomes.

Projects, generally, are undertaken in complex environments, under conditions of uncertainty, severe constraint and with limited resources. It is not possible therefore to weigh each demand equally in the accomplishment of clear strategic objectives, and it is these conflicts that give rise to ethical dilemmas. Solutions need to be negotiated and are often the outcome of compromise. As a result, it is not reasonable that one's own personal value system should be fully satisfied on each occasion, nor that it should serve as the only point of reference. Many other stakeholders are involved who have competing interests and different value systems. Project managers, therefore, need to adopt principles that help them to deal with this complexity, whether economic, non-economic, social or political. Project profit, for example, needs to be balanced against the need for corporate social responsibility and sustainable development. Indeed, an urgent imperative exists to improve the quality of life for all by the project. This includes the need to fulfil not only to fulfil the fiduciary responsibilities we have towards the project sponsor and project beneficiary but also to deal with all stakeholders in a fair and equitable manner, and includes our conduct in the management of the resources used to effect delivery - whether human, financial or material. It would be simplistic to say, therefore, that all is permissible providing one satisfies the maxim merely "to do no harm". In this sense, ethics lies beyond the jurisdiction of the law and regulation. Its purpose is to guide our action towards achieving enhanced and enduring value.

The study of ethics by early philosophers focused on the nature of moral virtue. The conclusion of this inquiry was that internal motivation and overt conduct combine to define personal character. Modern ethics, however, focuses on the ethical character of actions. The topic is researched under the headings of "normative" and "applied" ethics. Normative ethics concerns itself with how we ought to act and applied ethics investigates how moral outcomes can be achieved in specific situations. Project management as a management science has dimensions that are both normative and applied. As a career specialisation, they are normative and we demonstrate our commitment to the discipline and customs of our profession by the publication of a formal code of professional ethics. Its purpose is to engender public trust and to provide a standard by which we are willing to be held accountable. In its applied sense, we must build a framework to deal with a host of issues on which we must make ethical decisions. These include, *inter alia*, the ethics of business and capitalism; corporate social responsibility; social justice; stakeholder relations and management; finance; organizational ethics; decision ethics; the social, economic, political and ecological environments; marketing ethics; communication ethics, and many other matters. Self-preparation by study and experience

is the only way in which we can acquire the understanding necessary for sound judgement.

There are times when our decision-making will need to be based on factors of utilitarian interest. At other times, we will need to be careful not to sacrifice the end for the means. But at no point should be willing to betray the principles on which we stand.

-oOo-

