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Ethics—a key issue

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1. ETHICS

Ethics is the formulation and adherence to a set of values or beliefs. Most sustainable physical and social progress in society depends on shared values. We should differentiate between personal morals and corporate or societal ethics; but in the context of our discussion about engineering activities, the individual must subscribe personally to the corporate ethic or impossible tensions will arise. The ethical imperatives of the working environment or workplace may be different to but preferably will compliment, personal beliefs or systems of belief.

Ethics is a sensitive topic, but one which must be faced by engineers. Ethics underpin the values that determine what we do and how we do it, both as part of an organisation and as individuals. The focus of this edition of *Municipal Engineer* is on ethics in practice rather than a discussion on semantics around ethics. We therefore do not attempt to describe the ethical values you ought to pursue, but rather to describe how ethics affects engineering. Experience confirms that an organisation or an individual without a clear set of values (i.e. ethics) is a danger both to himself/herself and to those with whom he/she seeks to do business.

This then is my thesis: I firmly believe that any organisation, in order to survive and achieve success, must have a sound set of beliefs on which it premises all its policies and actions. Next, I believe that the most important single factor in corporate success is faithful adherence to those beliefs. And, finally, I believe if an organisation is to meet the challenge of a changing world, it must be prepared to change everything about itself except those beliefs.¹

Organisations will suffer by behaving unethically, even though the consequences may take some time to become apparent. But the individual working in those organisations or served by them cannot avoid being implicated. The loss is not just financial but more importantly of trust and goodwill. That loss of trust affects not only the organisation but also the individuals who work for it will be perceived as less trustworthy.

Most readers will recall the scandals surrounding firms who have acted without regard to any ethical system. The media gives such ethical failures a well-deserved prominence. However, these tend to focus on financial scandals and obvious environmental damage. Ethics is concerned with far more. Ethical values should be at the heart of all we do. Engineers

seek to change or maintain the built environment. We do so in order to provide for 'the use and convenience of Man'.² We seek to improve the quality of life of communities. Yet this statement in itself implies we are both able to define 'quality of life' and specifically achieve its improvement. Both are necessarily ethical issues. These issues clearly must be discussed and a shared agreement must be reached among professionals, and between professionals and the communities affected by the works they construct, manage, or maintain.

We argue that ethics essentially apply at three levels:

- The values of the recipients of our engineering works. These we must understand if we are to realise the optimum benefits from our schemes. Ethical understanding is a key ingredient to the project brief.
- Our organisation must articulate its values. Values determine the aims and objectives of the company or body's business plan. Values should be explained to employees and evidenced to clients. One chief executive stated: 'My job is to teach the values'.
- Individuals must adhere to the agreed ethical values. The editors' personal experiences confirm the devastating and wide-ranging effects of the unethical behaviour of people in responsible positions.

The papers provide an overview of these issues. The contexts are quite diverse, but serve to demonstrate the importance of the subject. Ethics is a fundamental issue to be explored in national and international context, and is of key relevance to governments, sponsors of engineering works, consultants, academics and contractors. As individual engineers, we ignore it at our peril.

Alan and Lorice Stainer emphasise the importance of corporate social responsibility along with the economic and technical considerations for the long-term success of a business. They confirm that ethics should be the central feature of business processes rather than in periphery. Ethical considerations should be inculcated across all of the business decision-making processes. They echo a need for the corporation to have a soul.

Linda Fan reports the results of a pilot survey of ethical decision-making. While the survey was undertaken in Hong Kong, the issues addressed are of international concern. The survey found that much reliance appears to be placed on legal

requirements and codes of practice, not least because available decision-making models do not deal adequately with ethical input and analysis. The author may well be right in concluding the need for the development of clearer and more practical decision tools for engineers facing ethical dilemmas.

Sue Cavill and Muhammed Sohail base their analysis of the ethical imperative of service provision on both developed and developing economies. They seek to explore the link between improved municipal performance and transparent accountability. Accountability is set in socio-economic and political contexts. Awareness that others are checking the professional's behaviour is a key factor in ensuring ethical standards. But one wonders whose are the determining standards? Municipal service providers need to understand the ethical values of the communities they seek to serve.

Professor Lewis provides an account of whistle blowing in the context of local government. The paper reports results of research by a Middlesex University team into means of reporting unethical behaviour. Reporting processes are available and are being used. However, users of procedures need more robust mechanisms in terms of confidentiality, defence against reprisal and advice and support for the reporters. Whistle-blowing is good business practice, worthy of wider adoption.

David Cook and John Kirke provide a very gloomy but realistic picture of global urban poverty, focussing on developing countries. Their message is very clear: not enough is being done to combat urban poverty. One of the possible solutions is to unlock dead capital. The existence of informal economies should be acknowledged and employed to complement weakening formal economies. The ethical implications, though not clearly articulated by the authors, are interesting. Their solution entails making so-called illegal activities legal on the ground of functionality and needs. However the greater ethical issue is continuing poverty. So the ethical conundrum is apparent.

Bert Hamilton provides an analysis that demonstrates the importance of the start-up phase of any project. He confirms the vital importance of correctly starting projects, and the impacts this can have on the whole life-cycle of the project. While others³ have commented on the importance of a comprehensive project brief and the disastrous consequences of inadequate or misunderstood briefs, David Lewis clarifies what must be considered at the outset. He confirms the importance of ethical considerations.

The prime purpose of the Institution of Civil Engineers is to act as a learned society. From that base, other functions flow, including qualification, membership standards, advocacy of engineering, promotion of the profession etc. The learned base is the core of our Institution, and its health dictates the well-being of all other subsidiary activities. A learned society collects, collates and disseminates knowledge. The Institution does so by written and verbal communication. Knowledge is expanding at an exponential rate.

'The formation of an Institution is marked by the making of value commitments, that is, choices which fix the assumptions of policy makers as to the nature of the enterprise, its distinctive aims,

methods, and roles. The Institutional leader is primarily an expert in the promotion and protection of values.'⁴

Thus our own Institution sets core values and thereby deduces a code of conduct by which its members are bound. The briefing by Professor Ridley on the outcome of the reviews by the Institution's Investigating Panel summarises the standards expected of members and, by implication, that action will be taken if these standards are breached. While we welcome the re-definition of standards, the Institution should do more to propagate them both with the members and the wider public. Indeed, the code of conduct must be internalised by members through reflection, expression, experience and exposure. This internalisation process builds a personal value system, corresponding closely to the desired values of the professional body. In our daily activities, the code of conduct that determines our decisions and actions is that which we have internalised and is not a remote reference document.

If a professional behaves in a way which does not correspond to the agreed code of conduct, we could deduce one or more of the following

- (a) the code of conduct was not actually agreed by all individual members
- (b) the code itself is inadequate, incomplete, irrelevant or unacceptable
- (c) the values have not been explained nor the code articulated
- (d) there is something significantly wrong with the internalisation process.

Civil engineers make big decisions. We deliver benefits or problems. Decision-making 'requires a set of basic values'.⁵ Ethics is at the core of what we do. We hope that this issue of the *Municipal Engineer* will generate vital, learned but personal discussion.

2. AWARDS

Papers published in *Municipal Engineer* each year are eligible for awards from The Institution of Civil Engineers. Papers in any of the ICE journals can be nominated for several awards, the Telford Medal, The George Stephenson Medal and the Baker Medal.

In addition each journal has awards dedicated to their specific subject area.

The following papers from the 2002 volume of *Municipal Engineer* have received awards.

George Stephenson Medal	Disappearing traffic? The story so far. Dr Sally Cairns, Professor Stephen Atkins and Professor Phil Goodwin, <i>Municipal Engineer</i> , 151, No. 1, 13–22.
Telford Prize (2)	Winter maintenance—how to avert the emergency. Douglas Kent, <i>Municipal Engineer</i> , 151, No. 4, 265–270.
James Hill Prize	Northmoor Homezone, Manchester. John Delap and Jim McMillan, <i>Municipal Engineer</i> , 151, No. 2, 131–138.

Trevithick Prize TravelSmart—Large-scale cost-effective mobility management, experiences from Perth. Bruce James, *Municipal Engineer*, 151, No. 1, 39–47.

Frederick Palmer Prize The engineer: a key enabler in urban design. Dr Farouk Stemmet, *Municipal Engineer*, 151, No. 2, 101–109.

REFERENCES

1. WATSON T. and BROWN C. C. *A business and its beliefs: The ideas that helped build IBM*, McGraw-Hill, 2003.
2. ICE Charter and Treadgold's definition of Civil Engineering.
3. For examples see: MORRIS P. W. G. *The Management of Projects*. Thomas Telford, London, 1997.
4. SELZNICK P. *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation*, 1957.
5. ARMSTRONG J., DIXON R. and ROBINSON S. *The Decision Makers—Ethics for Engineers*. Thomas Telford, London, 1999.