Shades of Gray in Project Management Ethics
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Introduction

Ethics plays an important role in project management. In this paper we will examine a couple of definitions of ethics and take a look at some ethics history and some project management codes of ethics. We will learn about the most common causes of ethical slips according to a global study and we will review several interesting project management ethical situations. This paper draws from the "Complete Guide to Ethics Management: An Ethics Toolkit for Managers" and from a very interesting paper titled "Black, White, and Shades of Gray - Ethics in Project Management."

Popular Topic

Ethics is a popular topic; many famous people have spoken about ethics. I have selected a few quotes to provoke a bit of thought.

- "The time is always right to do what is right." Martin Luther King.
- "The only tyrant I accept in this world is the 'still small voice within." Mahatma Gandhi.
- "Never let your sense of morals get in the way of doing what is right." Isaac Asimov.
- "Relativity applies to physics, not to ethics." Albert Einstein.

Some Definitions

Since much has already been written about ethics, we can benefit from some existing definitions. While I cannot say that these definitions are necessarily the best definitions, I can say that they serve the purpose for this paper. The definition about public-relations ploy seems a bit provocative. The one about a music band seems hard to believe – but it is true.

- Ethics
  - Standards of right and wrong that prescribe what to do.
  - Study dealing with what is the proper course of action.
- Business Ethics
  - Principles and moral or ethical problems that arise in a business environment.
- Code of Ethics
  - Expectations that we have of fellow practitioners and ourselves.

- o Attempt to assist those in an organization called upon to make a decision understand the difference between 'right' and 'wrong' and to apply this understanding to their decision.
- o A code of ethics is always a public-relations ploy; the question is whether it is only a public-relations ploy.
- o 1990's band that wrote and performed many genres including new wave and pop.

Looking Back

Looking back in time, we can see that history is full of the evolution of ethics. In early times we have the classical Greek philosopher Socrates and the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius commenting about our actions. Then we see the Italian Dominican Catholic Priest Thomas Aquinas and German philosopher commenting about our nature and morality.

- • 400 BC – Socrates – Better to suffer injustice than to do it.
- • 150 AD – Marcus Aurelius – If it is not right, do not do it; if it not true, do not say it.
- • 1250 – Thomas Aquinas – Natural law; the use of reason to analyze human nature.
- • 1800 – Immanuel Kant – An action is only truly moral if done from a sense of duty.

Within the last century, we see the Harvard Business School beginning to offer ethics classes. We also see the United Nations enacting the first global expression of rights. More recently in the U.S., unfortunately we saw the need for legislation aimed at unethical behavior in the business sector. And who among us hasn't looked at the causes of the global recession without wondering about the ethics of those that helped cause it to happen?

- • 1915 – Harvard Business School – First to offer en ethics class.
- • 1948 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights; United Nations enacts the first global expression of rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled.
- • 2000 – Ethical U.S. Business Scandals – Sarbanes–Oxley Act also known as the 'Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act.'

Currently, we can see much attention to ethics; at least as far as what we are being told to do. Ninety-percent of U.S. business schools teach ethics; Ninety-percent of U.S. corporations have formal codes of ethics. This includes project management professional associations – they have codes of ethics as well. This makes me wonder – with all of this attention being paid to ethics – why then do so many feel there is a problem?

Some Codes

We will now see that four of the largest project management professional associations in the world have formal codes of ethics that their members are pledged to abide by. Here are snippets of text from each of their codes. APM, based in the U.K, mentions public perception.

AIPM, based in Australia, mentions member conduct. ASAPM, the U.S. based element of the International Project Management Association, also mentions conduct. And PMI, the largest professional project management association in the world, has an ethical code that extends beyond the workplace to include at home.

- APM – Association for Project Management
  - Guide the member and raise the level of trust and confidence of the public in the profession.
- AIPM – Australian Institute of Project Management
  - Professional standards and conduct required by the Institute as a condition of membership or personal association with the Institute.
- ASAPM – American Society for the Advancement of Project Management
  - In recognition of our personal obligation to our profession, to its members, and to the communities we serve, do hereby commit ourselves to the highest ethical and professional conduct.
- PMI – Project Management Institute
  - We are committed to doing what is right and honorable, set high standards for ourselves, aspire to meet these standards in all aspects of our lives - at work, at home, in our profession.

Ethical Slips

I have been impressed with an interesting ethics study of 1,100 professionals titled "The Ethical Enterprise: A Global Study of Business Ethics." In this 2005 worldwide study by the American Management Association about half of the respondents were in the U.S., about half were in management, and about half were female. What caught my eye was the list of the most likely causes for ethical compromise.
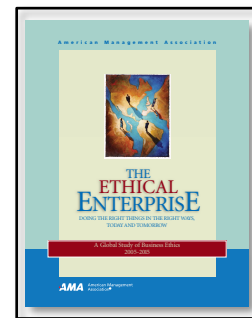
- Pressure to meet unrealistic business objectives/deadlines.
- Desire to further one's career.
- Desire to protect one's livelihood.

What really caught my eye was the first cause - pressure to meet unrealistic business objectives/deadlines. Doesn't that describe many project environments? Aren't many project managers pressured to meet expanding sets of requirements – scope creep? Aren't many project managers pressured to meet sometimes unrealistic schedules and/or to maintain schedule even when critical path circumstances change? Of course we are!

Here are some quotes from actual project managers that were captured in 2005 by Jack Eckmire in "The Ethical Dilemma, and by Wayne Turk in 2008 in "Common Sense Project Management." I think they reflect the tone of the pressure on project managers to meet unrealistic business objectives/deadlines.

- "I don't care what the regulations say, I need it now."
- "National security is at stake here."
- "Nobody will find out till it is too late."
- "If you don't do this, we'll all suffer the consequences."
- "Our competition is doing it. We have no choice."
- "If we don't cut some corners, we'll never make the timeline."
- "We can always fix it later."

Ethical Dilemma

Ethical dilemmas arise because you cannot establish in advance preferred behaviors in response to every potential ethical situation. Even if you are a highly ethical person, who has benefited from following ethical codes, situations will arise that challenge us to use judgment and make decisions. To make decisions about choices where the alternatives have significant value, where the real alternatives are equally justifiable, where there are significant consequences of the choice to be made. These can be tough choices that provide an ethical dilemma.

We will not take a look at a few hypothetical dilemmas; project manager situations where a decision needs to be made; situations where the answer may not be obvious; situations that require critical thinking and judgment; situations with shades of gray. These dilemmas are brought to us courtesy of the excellent reference titled "Complete Guide to Ethics Management: An Ethics Toolkit for Managers." In each hypothetical situation the dilemma is for the project manager. It is instructive to imagine that you were the project manager – what would you do?
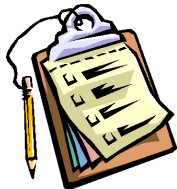
Hypothetical Project – Dilemma A
- Testing is about to start on a project
  - o I am the project manager.
  - o I notice the test plan does not cover one area.
  - o The area is not an official requirement, but it is important.
  - o We have been having some problems in this area.
- What do I do?
  - o Bring it up now up with senior management / with customer?
  - o Bring it up later?
  - o Do nothing?

Hypothetical Project – Dilemma B
- Customer asks for an added project feature
  - o I am the project manager.

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- I provide price to customer; they cannot afford it.
- I know that the added feature would benefit the project.
- I know the feature is available at less cost from a competitor.
- What do I do?
  - Bring it up now up with senior management / with customer?
  - Bring it up later?
  - Do nothing?

Hypothetical Project – Dilemma C

- A project team member refuses to use our email system.
  - I am the project manager.
  - The team member has a critical project role.
  - He says that the company that built the email system has practices that violate his strict religious beliefs.
- What do I do?
  - Accommodate the team member?
  - Get someone else to address the issue?
  - Do nothing?

Hypothetical Project – Dilemma D

- A project is about to be downsized
  - I am the project manager.
  - I know that a team member will soon loose his job.
  - I have been directed to say nothing until formal announcement.
  - I know that team member is about to buy a new house.
- What do I do?
  - Bring it up now up with senior management / with team member?
  - Bring it up later?
  - Do nothing?

Hypothetical Project – Dilemma E

- A new project manager position is becoming available.
  - I would like the new project manager position.
  - My boss told me in confidence he will not give me the job.
  - He said he will give the position to a friend of mine in 2 weeks.
- My friend told me in confidence that he plans to quit in 2 months.
- What do I do?
  - Tell my friend?
  - Tell my boss?
  - Do nothing?

Ethical Choices

As we have seen from the hypothetical project manager dilemmas; choices need to be made. As project managers we have the responsibility to make choices. They are frequently not black or white, they are frequently the lesser of two evils or the better of two rights, they are shades of gray.

And how do we approach making ethical choices? As project managers, we do what we have learned works so well in project management, we plan and prepare! Just as we would not want to enter a critical phase or milestone on a project without planning and preparing, we can use planning and preparation as the approach toward making ethical choices.

For me, my planning and preparation involves reflecting on my personal code of ethical values as they have evolved over time: it involves reflecting on the values associated with my religion; it involves reflecting on the formal and informal values of the organization I work in; and it involves reflecting on the code of ethics of my professional association. Note that I have used the term "code" in an expansive and inclusive way – to include a multitude of formal and informal codes. I find this to be a help.

Conclusion - Role of Leaders

Here is some information from another pair of interesting global studies; one is titled "Business Ethics Today and Tomorrow: A Global Survey," from the American Management Association, and the other titled "The Ethics Landscape in American Business," is from the Society for Human resource Management. Here we see that leadership may be the single greatest influencer of culture and ethical behavior. Here we see that employees are much less likely (by a huge 50-percentage point margin) to observe misconduct if top management conducts itself ethically.

And, what is our role? As project managers, we are leaders! Our role is to lead by ethical example. Our role is to maintain ethical standards. Our role is to assist others in making ethical decisions. At the end of the day – I think that we, as project managers, have an ethical leadership responsibility.

References

If you do take an interest in following-up with some additional reading, I offer the following references, from which I drew in the writing of this paper.

- Ethics Definitions:
  - http://ww.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/whatisethics.html
  - http://www.importanceofphilosophy.com/Ethics_Main.html

- Business Ethics Definitions:
  - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Business_ethics

- Code of Ethics Definitions:
  - http://www.pmi.org/About-Us/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics.aspx
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  - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_of_Ethics_(band)

- Ethical Dilemma Definition:
  - Common Sense Project Management: Wayne Turk 2008

- History – Now:
  - http://www.dau.mil/pubscats/PubsCats/atl/2007_07_08/turk2_ja07.pdf
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  - http://www.apm.org.uk/ProfessionalConduct.asp
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  - http://www.asapm.org/a_ethics.asp
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  - The Ethical Enterprise: A Global Study of Business Ethics (AMA 2005) http://www.amanet.org/HREthicsSurvey06.pdf

- Leaders:
  - Business Ethics Today and Tomorrow: A Global Survey (AMA/HRI 2005) http://www.ethics2biz.com/AMA%20Report.pdf
  - The Ethics Landscape in American Business (SHRM/ERC 2008) http://www.shrm.org/Research/SurveyFindings/Pages/default.aspx

- Black, White, and Shades of Gray – Ethics in Project Management
  - http://www.dau.mil/pubscats/PubsCats/atl/2007_07_08/turk2_ja07.pdf

- Complete Guide to Ethics Management: An Ethics Toolkit for Managers
  - http://managementhelp.org/ethics/ethxgde.htm