Reflections on the PMI Code of Ethics

Dr. Bill Carswell

Embry Riddle Aeronautical University

Abstract

The PMI Code of Ethics assists the project manager in doing what is "right and honorable." It applies to all PMI members regardless of whether they hold a PMP or not. PMI members found in violation of the code of ethics are subject to disciplinary procedures before the PMI Ethics Review Committee. The four elements of PMI's code of ethics are responsibility, respect, fairness and honesty. PMI members are responsible for decisions and actions they make or fail to make, and the consequences that result. Respect is the showing of regard for ourselves, others and resources entrusted to us. These resources include people, money, reputations, the safety of others and the environment. Fairness is the making of acting impartially and objectively. This includes transparent decision-making, impartiality, providing equal access to information for all concerned parties, and making sure all qualified candidates have equal access to opportunities. Honesty is about understanding the truth and acting truthfully. PMI members should never deceive others or be dishonest for personal gain.

The purpose of the Project Management Institute's (PMI) Code of Ethics (PMI, 2006) is to assist the project manager in "doing what is right and honorable." But the PMI Code of Ethics is more than an outline of behavior project managers should strive for. It is a MANDATORY code of ethics for all PMI members regardless of whether or not they hold a Project Management Professional (PMP) certification. If a PMI member is found to violate the code of ethics they can be subject to "disciplinary procedures before PMI's Ethics Review Committee."

The four key elements of the code of ethics are outlined in chapters 2-5. They are:

- Responsibility

- Respect

- Fairness

- Honesty

In some ways this resembles the Rotary International "4-Way Test." The Rotary club has established a 4-way test as one of its guiding principles (Rotary International, 2012) for its members. This principle encourages members to ask the following four questions about everything they think, say or do:

1. Is it the TRUTH?

2. Is it FAIR to all concerned?

3. Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?

4. Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

This is certainly a viable code of ethics for project managers to complement the PMI code of ethics.

Responsibility

The PMI Code of Conduct defines "Responsibility" as the "duty to take ownership for the decisions we make or fail to make, the action we take or fail to take, and the consequences that result." The basic elements of responsibility are that we act in the best interest of society, public safety and the environment, that we correct our mistakes promptly, and honor confidentiality.

I agree with most of this, but I think the first element can be questionable. Who is to say what is in the best interest of society and the environment? For example, there are reasonable people who consider fossil fuels to be inherently bad for the environment, that global warming is an imminent catastrophe waiting to happen for our environment and unavoidable as long as we continue to use fossil fuels. Others argue that the danger to the environment is gradual enough to be manageable and that to eliminate fossil fuels would cripple our modern society and standard of living, causing societal damage that far outweighs the environmental damage caused by the use of fossil fuels. With this perspective any PMI member involved in the acquisition, distribution or use of fossil fuels is inherently unethical, as is anyone trying to eliminate the use of fossil fuels! Who is to be the ethical arbiter in this conflict? This issue is raging in our society today, and certainly PMI cannot claim the morally certain high ground in the conflict.

A less obvious issue is photovoltaic solar power. This is often touted as a replacement to coal-fired power plants as a clean energy source that does not contribute to global warming. Nothing could be further from the truth. The use of solar power is clean, but the production of solar photovoltaic cells is extremely destructive to the environment. The amount of energy it takes to produce a photovoltaic cell is very high,

and amount and nature of toxic industrial chemicals used in the preparation of solar photovoltaics would shock the average person unfamiliar with the process. With toxic waste dumps leaking into groundwater in disturbingly high numbers, is this really a more ethical technology than fossil fuels?

My point here is not to defend or attack fossil fuels or solar photovoltaics, but to illustrate that it is inappropriate for PMI to include safeguarding society and the environment as an ethical standard. I believe PMI should limit the scope of its ethics to project managers and their primary role in managing projects. The current wording of the code of ethics leaves open to interpretation that a project manager's choice of projects could be subject to ethical review, and that is a road we don't need to go down. There is no way to judge a project manager's safeguarding of society and the environment by any objective, absolute metric, and if it cannot be evaluated with certainty, it should not be a PMI requirement.

Respect

"Respect" is defined as "our duty to show a high regard for ourselves, others, and the resources entrusted to us. Resources entrusted to us may include people, money, reputation, the safety of others and natural or environmental resources." The PMI Code of Ethics states that members should aspire to avoid being disrespectful to others, listen to and understand others, confront conflict directly and behave professionally. In addition to "aspiring," PMI mandates that we negotiate in good faith, that we avoid personal benefit at the expense of others through the use of our position and authority in the workplace, that we do not behave abusively toward others and that we respect the property rights of others.

These ethical standards reflect a mind-set that is becoming ingrained in our business world today. Negotiating in good faith with the government is often enforced through contract audits. But it is also self-enforcing in many ways. When two sides negotiate in good faith, they have each other's best interests in mind and are looking for win-win solutions. When one side is trying to take advantage of the other to create an unfair outcome, good faith is not present and business relationships are frequently terminated.

Regarding the use of a position of authority to exact personal gain from others, many companies enforce this standard with vigor. If an employee at work can show that a manager at work has used coercion to gain personal favors, companies will usually punish the offender appropriately, and the perpetrator may even be subject to criminal prosecution. Sometimes the victim is not an individual, but the company itself. I know personally of two separate instances where employees were using company resources for personal gain and were fired. In both cases they were running personal businesses using company computers and doing personal business work on company time. In their minds it was justified since the businesses were small, there wasn't a lot of money involved, their personal business did not conflict with their employer's business and the amount of time it took in no way interfered with work. However, in both cases authorities were notified by co-workers and investigations ensued that that involved confiscating the computers without notice. When personal business files were found on the computers both individuals were promptly escorted of the building and their employment terminated. These events were not related, being separated by miles and years. This shows that companies take this seriously, and they should.

Recourse for abuse is firmly embedded in our culture. Most companies have an abuse hotline and are careful to take complaints seriously and follow up with careful and thorough investigations. Not only is it the right thing to do, but companies are keen to avoid workplace disruptions, government investigations and expensive legal battles with the attendant bad publicity.

Fairness

"Fairness" is described by PMI as "our duty to make decisions and act impartially and objectively. Our conduct must be free from competing self interest, prejudice and favoritism." The elements of fairness are described as decision-making transparency, practicing impartiality, providing equal access to information and making sure opportunities are available to all qualified candidates.

This aspect of the PMI code of ethics most resembles the Rotary International Four-Way Test:

1. Is it the TRUTH?

2. Is it FAIR to all concerned?

3. Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?

4. Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

Decision-making transparency ensures fairness, builds goodwill demonstrates that decisions are beneficial, made in the best interest of all concerned. Impartiality and equal access to information are also key elements in this test.

Honesty

Honesty is always the best policy. PMI defines it as "our duty to understand the truth and act in a truthful manner both in our communications and in our conduct." PMI practitioners must never deceive others or be dishonest for personal gain or at the expense of others.

Dishonest managers gain a reputation for dishonesty and always struggle for career success. Customers gravitate to honest managers because customers know they are getting truthful reporting on project status and issues, honest risk projections, and accurate projections about the future course of their projects. Hence honesty is not only the ethical thing to do in the best interest of others and society, it is also a good idea for self-preservation and effective project management.

References

Project Management Institute. (2006). *Project management institute code of ethics and*

professional conduct. Retrieved from http://www.pmi.org/en/About-

Us/Ethics/~/media/PDF/Ethics/ap_pmicodeofethics.ashx.

Rotary International. (2012) *The four-way test.* Retrieved from

http://www.rotary.org/en/aboutus/rotaryinternational/guidingprinciples/pages/ride

fault.aspx.