The Necessity for Ethical Behavior in the Management of Projects

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Abstract

The objective of this essay is to address the necessity for ethics and ethical behavior in the management of projects. Global markets, industry, and organizations operating on multiple continents within differing cultures require a project manager capable of identifying and understanding the need for ethics and ethical behavior. This paper will review the concepts of ethics. Concepts such as ethics as a philosophy, divine command, theory of forms, and circumstantial ethics serve as the foundation for modern day ethical codes. Personal and Profession reputations are discussed, and how each is impacted by ethical and non-ethical behavior. A review of the Project Management Institutes Code of Ethical Behavior and the requirements required of each member. Finally, we complete with our review with a brief discussion of ethics in Project Management.

The Necessity for Ethical Behavior in the Management of Projects

Ethics as a Philosophy

Ethics, also called moral philosophy, is the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad, right and wrong (Singer, n.d.) but, where do ethics originate? Three views concerning the origin of ethics exist in western philosophy (1) Devine Command Theory of Ethics, (2) Theory of Forms, and (3) Circumstantial Ethics.

Figure 1. Ethical Decisions by Sarah Kranz (c) 2000. Downloaded from Chabad.org "Where Do Ethics Come From?" Used without the artist's permission

Devine Command Theory of Ethics

The Devine Command Theory rests on the belief that actions are right or wrong because they accord or conflict with the commands of God ("Devine Command Theory," 2008). Based on an origin of divine inspiration, the Devine Command Theory continues to meet with great skepticism. In 500 BC, Socrates and Euthyphro discussed the point of Devine Command in

which Socrates states "is what is holy, holy, because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?" ("Devine Command Theory," 2008). If God approves something because it is holy, then that suggests that someone other than God determines what is holy.

In my opinion, each person has within him or her, a basic understanding of right and wrong, and the ability to apply it at their will. The understanding of right and wrong might be instilled or influenced by our parents, grandparents, etc., but it does not originate there. If it did, then how did our parents, grandparents, etc. develop their understanding? How about their parents, grandparents, etc.? It goes on and on? How about Euthyphro? Remember, the discussion between Euthyphro and Socrates occurred 500 BC.

Theory of Forms

Plato put forward the belief that an absolute standard of morality and ethics existed outside of God (Brackman, n.d., p. 1). The failure of Plato's standard to reveal itself prevents this theory from gaining support. Without a belief in Devine Command, the ethical dilemma becomes: what is ethical?

Circumstantial Ethics

Based on circumstance and individual knowledge, ethics are individualized relative to circumstance, people, and cultures (Brackman, n.d., p. 1). Ethical variation based on circumstance, people, and culture overwhelms the basic understanding of ethics and logically lends itself to the conclusion that there is no such thing as ethics. In my opinion, circumstances may vary, but not the ethical foundation of right and wrong. This is not to say that the decision(s) won't be difficult, but rather the ethical foundation still exists.

Reputation

A reputation is the belief that someone or something has a particular habit or characteristic ("Reputation," n.d.). Reputations can be gained based on characteristics such as reliability, honesty, and hard work. Each of these characteristics applies to bother personal and professional identities. Considered to be their most prized characteristic, individuals and organizations prize their ethical stance within their communities. While hard to earn, ethical reputations are easily lost and all but impossible to regain.

Personal

Personal ethics stem from each's philosophy of right and wrong. Similar in nature to most other individuals, personal ethics serve as a roadmap of how to act and how to decide what to do. From my point of view, a person's ethics is pretty much all they have to call their own. They might not aspire to higher office, or to make a million dollars in their startup, but what they will be able to do is hold their head up and enjoy the respect of others around them. The news is filled with examples of individuals who sold their ethics and respect for power or fame. Once lost, personal ethics reputation is hard to impossible to restore.

Professional

Professional ethics provides insight into how organizations deal with a group of people with varying degrees of ethical belief. Most organizations provide either a product or a service. If for instance, a service based industry were trying to reassure their customer base of their reputation, they could do so by explaining their business ethics. What they stand for, and how they deal with other individuals or organizations is important. From my point of view, professional ethics reputations have been dealt a large number of blows in the past decade. Enron and other organizations have been exposed for their lies and greed. Millions of investors

monies lost forever. Know who you are dealing with is essential in any situation, including organizations.

Code of Ethics

Project Management Institutes Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct sets the standards for its members. Vision and applicability are covered to ensure members understand the standard to meet. "We are committed to doing what is right and honorable." ("Code of Ethics," n.d., p. 1). The opening statement sets the standard for all PMI members. Chapter two tackles the subject of responsibility and how each member is to act. Taking on those projects consistent with a member's abilities is a sign of acting responsibility. Taking on projects beyond a manager's capabilities if neither right nor honorable and would, therefore, be considered irresponsible. Chapter three revisits the concept of respect. Respect is earned and not given. To earn respect an individual or organization must apply mandatory and aspirational standards to the day-in and day-out activities. Maintaining performance based on set standards leads to respect earned.

Project Management

Project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements (*PMI*, 2013, p. 554). What happens when the application of the required tools and techniques conflict with interest internal or external to the project, such as the environment? This question and many others are the reasons why organizations have developed vision and ethics statements. Conflict is a natural occurrence and therefore requires an ethics guideline for others to follow. In cases where ethical conflict is not so easily resolved through an organizations vision, and ethics statement, human resources, and senior leadership are consulted to help resolve and eliminate the gap in standards.

Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical dilemmas are those situations in which taking one course of action would undermine another ethical or moral principle and create a conflict. Difficult, but not impossible resolve, ethical dilemmas can be resolved through the use of tools and techniques such as the Ethical Decision-Making Framework (EDMF).
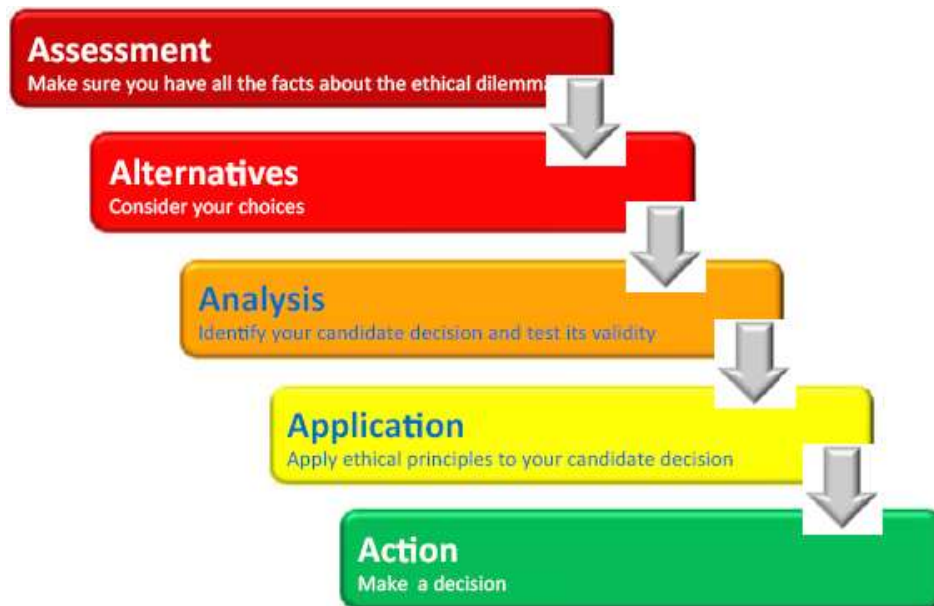

Figure 2. PMI EDMF Steps

The EDMF process begins with the understanding that project management has a desire to make an ethical decision. Used in combination with critical thinking, EDMF provides a systematic, structured process for management to follow. Not intended to provide an ethical solution, the EDMF process helps project management determine the ethical and best course of action to take. Assessing the dilemma, considering available choices, analyzing decisions for validity, applying ethical principles to decisions, and then making a decision is logical and directly supports the commitment to do what is right and honorable.

Why Project Ethics Matter

From my point of view, project ethics matter for the simple fact that people won't trust or work with anyone who has no ethical principles. Ethics serves as the foundation for trust and respect. Project sponsors, stakeholders, and team members need to respect and trust project management with their resources for the project to succeed. Leadership is built on trust. If the foundation is cracked, the future of a project is in doubt (O'Brochta, 2016).

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