

## **ETHICS FABLES**

The following are fictionalized ethical dilemmas of the kind that may arise in the course of your work for an employer or for a client. At the end of each story, you are asked to recommend a course of action, from among the alternatives offered, or another alternative you have identified.

The broad choices in each story are:

1. continue or carry on with the job or the project: accept the situation as it is
2. delay or suspend the action presented as the next step in the story; initiate your own actions to alter the situation
3. resign or withdraw from the job or the project

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## **FABLE 1** Perquisite or Pilferage?

Your first assignment in your new job is a business meeting in Kelowna. After the meeting, which runs late, your boss makes airplane reservations to get you both home to Vancouver. She books flights connecting in Calgary. You ask why she does not book an available direct flight which is faster and cheaper. “I get more air miles this way” she replies, “and the Client pays for our travel in any case.”

What should you do: • go along? • find another option for action? • refuse and book your own flight?

(This fable is based on an ethical dilemma presented in *The Globe and Mail*, ETHICS 101, column)

## **FABLE 2** You Can Always Find a Way

You are a consultant engaged to work on a project team composed of Client employees and other consultants. The project office is located in another city, remote from the client's headquarters. A detailed budget must be presented to the Steering Committee tomorrow, but there is no spreadsheet software on the computer in the project office, and no other way to assemble and present the budget data.. The woman who does the word processing for the project offers to work late to prepare the presentation documents. She is highly proficient with Lotus™ and can meet the deadline if she has the software, but she is not familiar with any other spreadsheet package.

You phone the Purchasing Department at the Client headquarters to request a purchase order for the Lotus software. Purchasing advises that the corporate standard spreadsheet package is Excel™, and a purchase order will not be issued for any other package. There is no possibility of hiring an Excel operator who can produce the budget in time for the meeting.

You explain the situation to the Project Manager, who is a Client employee. He suggests that you personally buy Lotus from the software store next door, and claim the cost on your expense report, which he will approve.

What do you do: • go along? • find another option for action? • resign?

### **FABLE 3** Duty of Honesty to Whom?

Ms. Scott is the administrator of the Society's building, reporting directly to the Board of Directors. Mr. Erse is the custodian and maintenance worker for the building, also reporting to the Board. Ms. Scott does the payroll and has to communicate with Erse to convey tenant and renter requirements and requests. She finds Erse to be a rude and abusive woman-hater who later denies to others the things he says to her in private. She observes that Erse cheats on his time sheets and makes extensive unauthorized personal use of the Society's facilities and equipment. She reports these matters to her supervising Board member, but no action is ever taken.

Eventually, the Board does decide to dismiss Erse as part of a re-organization. However, because there have been no records kept of his misbehaviours, and no warnings or negative job evaluations, he is not dismissed for cause. Erse is dismissed with notice, and is given a generous payment in lieu of notice. Erse engages a lawyer and demands a bigger settlement. Wishing to avoid a lawsuit, the Board agrees to a larger termination payment. Erse accepts the larger settlement with the condition that he also be given a favourable letter of reference.

Ms Scott's Board member prepares the laudatory letter of reference and brings it to Ms. Scott to have it typed on the Society's letterhead. After signing the letter, the Board member asks Ms. Scott to take it home with her that night, and to deliver it to the Society's lawyer in the morning. The letter sits on Ms Scott's mantle throughout the evening. Her partner, upon hearing the story, tells her to burn the letter. Ms. Scott does not sleep well that night.

What should Ms. Scott do: • go along? • find another option for action? • resign?

#### **FABLE 4** Water Pollution from a Chemical Plant

Brenda MacDonald, a Professional Engineer, is manager of a chemical plant in a northern Canadian town. Early this summer, she noticed that the plant was creating slightly more water pollution in the lake into which its waste line drains than is legally permitted.

If she contacts the Provincial Ministry of the Environment and reveals the problem, the result will be a considerable amount of unfavourable publicity for the plant. The publicity will also hurt the lakeside town's resort business and may scare the community. Apart from that, solving the problem will cost her company well over \$1 million.

If she tells no one, it is unlikely that outsiders will discover the problem, because the violation poses no danger whatsoever to people. At the most it will endanger a small number of fish.

What should Ms. MacDonald do: • reveal the problem? • pursue other options?  
• disregard the problem?

[This case is taken from Andrews and Kemper, *Canadian Professional Engineering Practice and Ethics*, 1999.]

## **FABLE 5** Will the Real Client Please Stand

NVE Engineering has hired you as project manager for the design and construction of an agricultural product processing plant . The Principals of NVE are specialists in the process technology of the proposed plant, and have been instrumental in convincing the owner, AgriCorp, that the investment in the plant is economically justified. The project management and engineering work for AgriCorp is the only substantial contract that NVE has; the business prospects of the engineering firm are riding entirely on this project.

AgriCorp is an investment vehicle organized for this one plant. The entrepreneurial president of AgriCorp has assembled an investor group which includes farm producers, downstream processors, and consumer product marketers. The largest single investor is a labour union pension fund, whose managers are not knowledgeable in either farming, the processing technology, plant construction, or the marketing of the products.

At the conclusion of the conceptual design and project planning stage, the NVE Principals instruct you and your team to prepare a contingency-free project cost estimate, with no allowances for potential cost increases or risk events. The Principals deliver the estimate to the Owner labelled as the Owner's Budget for the project, accompanied by no opinion on the validity of the numbers, and with no explanation of the basis for the numbers. This is done contrary to your advice that NVE should provide an estimate that is realistic in the opinion of the team. You discover that one of the NVE Principals has sent a highly optimistic project schedule to AgriCorp. It is a chart which you have not reviewed and which shows durations that meet the Owner's target date, but that are not based on any historical data or analysis.

You and the team are asked to present the estimate to the AgriCorp executives. You use this as the opportunity to explain the optimistic nature of the numbers and to outline some of the uncertainties that would warrant the addition of both a project contingency and an Owner's contingency. The AgriCorp executives are seemingly indifferent and unmoved by this news. You recall a previous conversation with one of the NVE Principals about the possibility of cost over-runs during construction, in which the suggested remedy was to go back to the investors for supplemental funding, since by then it would be too late to do anything but continue. The next day, you learn that the AgriCorp investors have decided to proceed with the plant, apparently on the basis of the estimate and schedule provided by NVE.

What do you do: • go along? • find another option for action? • resign?

## **A Suggested Strategy for Dealing With Ethical Dilemmas**

A situation may pose an ethical dilemma in which the professional is typically faced with two or more courses of action that are equally undesirable.

The first step is to analyze the facts and to identify the ethical issues involved . These questions should assist in the analysis:

- Who is involved? Who are the “parties at interest” Who is benefiting and who is being harmed?
- What type of harm or damage has occurred or may occur?
- How has this harm occurred , or how may it occur?
- Which general area of law or ethics appears to apply to the situation?

Once the nature of the problem and the ethical issues have been clearly stated, follow the next three steps, described by the acronym GAD, to aid in choosing a course of action:

- Generate alternative actions
- Analyse the implications of each action, taking into account the interests of each party
- Decide on one action

### **Generate Alternatives**

In this step, the goal is to generate (identify or imagine) all the alternatives. Sometimes, the initial perception of the situation suggests an ethical dilemma with only two alternatives, both of which are undesirable. However, you may be able to suggest a third possibility, which may be better.

The new course of action may be a compromise, or a modification of one alternative to eliminate its negative aspects. This step requires creative thought and may be difficult. Creative techniques which are commonly used can be applied here; for example brainstorming, listing all the alternatives, or recalling parallels from other fields. You might also imagine yourself as one of the parties. The goal is to find a new course of action without the undesirable aspects of the ethical dilemma.

## **Analyse the Possible Courses of Action**

When several courses of action may apply to the situation, each must be analyzed to determine its consequences, and with this knowledge, to determine which is best. That is, you want the simplest course of action that solves the problem without leading to unacceptable side effects and hardships. It may help to ask questions concerning each possible course of action , such as these:

- Is the action legal ?
- Is it consistent with human rights, employment standards and labour law?
- Is it consistent with the code of ethics and /or ethical theories?

To answer the third question, it may be helpful to examine the benefits and hardships each course of action may create for each of the parties, identified above. Then questions such as these can be posed:

- What benefits will result, and who gets the most benefit?
- What hardships are involved, and are the benefits and hardships fairly distributed?

## **Decide on One Action**

The analysis in the previous step, it is hoped, will show one course of action to be best.

However in some cases it may appear that an acceptable solution does not exist. If so, one must chose the better option or the one which is least undesirable.

Or, the arguments for conflicting alternatives may be so equally balanced that no choice of action is clearly superior. The dilemma persists. It is usually best, in these cases, to choose the course of action which does not yield a benefit to the person making the decision. If the alternatives are equally balanced, and no possibility of personal benefit exists, then this choice will ensure that the decision is seen to be morally defensible.

[These suggestions are drawn from Andrews and Kemper, *Canadian Professional Engineering Practice and Ethics*, 1999.]



## References and Resources

Andrews, G. C. and Kemper, J. D., *Canadian Professional Engineering and Practice*, Second Edition, Toronto, Harcourt Canada, 1999.

Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia, *Code of Ethics*, <https://www.apeg.bc.ca/For-Members/Ethics,-Law-and-conduct>. Additional resources on this site include guidelines for application; FAQs on ethics, the law, and conduct; articles; and links to external resources.

Globe and Mail, *Ethics 101 and Workplace Ethics 101*. Between 2202 and 2007, *The Globe and Mail*. published a weekly column which presented an ethical dilemma and invited readers to submit an answer. The best answers were published in the following week. Some of the columns still posted on [www.theglobeandmail.com](http://www.theglobeandmail.com). can be found with a Google search using “ethics 101”

PMI<sup>®</sup>, *Member Ethical Standards and Member Code Of Ethics*, [www.pmi.org](http://www.pmi.org), 1999.

PMI<sup>®</sup>, *Project Management Professional Code of Professional Conduct*, [www.pmi.org](http://www.pmi.org), 1999.

University of British Columbia, W. Maurice Young Centre for Applied Ethics, [www.ethics.ubc.ca](http://www.ethics.ubc.ca) See especially *Ethics and Conflict of Interest*, by Michael McDonald..