Leadership that counts

by Jim Ridler, P.Eng.

Engineers are leaders, setting examples and making difficult decisions that affect the public, employers and our colleagues. Professional image and excellence depend on strong leadership.

As professional engineers, we are all leaders, like it or not. We have to make difficult decisions, especially related to ethics. Those decisions will produce consequences for others, good and bad–more of the former we hope. The decisions we make will also provide the standards for others to follow. For both of these reasons, our leadership decisions must be based on ethical principles. What we're striving for is "principled leadership."

This approach will help us in our careers, as integrity and honour are primary assets. It will also help our profession to maintain its standards and image. And it will lay the foundation for professional excellence, moving beyond our minimum obligations (what we have to do) to strive for superior results (what we ought to do)–to "go the extra mile."

Do the right thing

What makes a good leader? Leaders do the right thing. They accomplish this by turning principles into action. They exercise wisdom, by using information in the right way. Leaders inspire trust. They establish values that underpin all policies, practices and programs. They have the conscience, courage and conviction to ensure that their decisions reflect these values and reinforce trust.

In engineering, our leaders recognize our professional responsibilities and the corresponding high standards to which we all must aspire, such as advocacy for safety and environmental protection.

Leaders accept not only responsibility, but also personal accountability. This means they are bound to answer personally for performance of duty, as individual engineers and for their subordinates. Accountability has come to include the concept of "due diligence," which covers having the right process as well as the right results, like implementing a strong safety program as well as a good safety record.

Good rules to work by

Principles are moral or ethical standards that define good behaviour. These principles are the tools by which leaders can know they are doing the right thing in the right way.

Engineers who work by these principles will build a strong practice, based on professional excellence. Principles underlie laws and societal values. Here are some examples:
◆ Show respect for individuals and their property.
◆ Help others.
◆ Do not cause harm to others.
◆ Provide equal opportunity.
◆ Conserve our environment.

While these principles guide leaders in general, engineers have a specific guide to follow: PEO's code of ethics. This is our "ought to" list. Here are the underlying principles of the code of ethics:
◆ Protect public welfare and the environment.
◆ Be fair and loyal.
◆ Follow high ideals.
◆ Be faithful and honourable.
◆ Avoid or disclose any conflict of interest.
◆ Expose unethical conduct.

Note the similarities between the two lists. The same principles behind laws and societal values also underpin the engineer's code of ethics. There are just differences of emphasis. The obvious example is that the engineer's duty to public welfare is paramount.

Opportunities for leadership

There are opportunities for professional engineers to go beyond our minimum professional obligations. A recent example is the extension of PEO's professional practice guideline to include environmental guidelines, and to interpret the engineer's duty to protect public safety and welfare to include our environment. An individual engineer might, for example, advocate environmental sustainability efforts in his or her organization.

Another opportunity for providing principled leadership could involve clarifying how PEO's ethics code and its underlying principles cover international engineering practice by Ontario engineers working outside of Canada. For example, should the profession endorse the Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials approved recently by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)? This convention requires Canada and

Breaking his own office rules

Edith Earnest arrived at work to find the facilities manager, human resources manager and security manager in her office. Edith is the ethics advisor for a major engineering consulting firm with international operations. She is also an experienced engineer. Recently, the firm had initiated a no-smoking policy for its head office.

The reason for the uninvited guests soon became clear. Facilities staff had found cigarette butts in a secure area when they opened the head office. Further inspection found more butts in the office of Joe Jolly, the general manager and an engineer. Evidence of drinking was also found. Not only had smoking and drinking policy violations occurred, but there were concerns about either a security breach or abuse by cleaning staff.

A notice was posted giving a brief description of the incident, asking employees for any related information and reminding them about the company's policies about smoking and drinking in the office. Since there was still no response, electronic records of office access were examined. These cleared the cleaning staff, but showed that Joe Jolly had been at the office at a late hour, used his phone and then left. Joe was a smoker.

With this information, Edith and the security manager approached Joe's secretary. Having heard the latest, she acknowledged with great reluctance that Joe had been out of town, but had flown back last night. She also admitted that, under the circumstances, prior experience made it conceivable that the policy-breaker was Joe.

After much discussion, Edith and the security manager decided they had the evidence required to bring up the issue with Joe at the first opportunity. After hearing them out, Joe sheepishly acknowledged that he had had too much to drink on the flight home, come to his office briefly, smoked, made a phone call and gone home. He also apologized for breaking his own office rules and all the trouble he had caused.

Edith and the security manager decided that the issue had been resolved, and that the matter should remain confidential. There was no repeat occurrence. In fact, the incident and its handling appeared to have a salutary effect on the general manager's drinking as well. Joe was later promoted to president.

Lessons learned

Joe Jolly had a failure in principled leadership. He disobeyed his own policies, then tried to hide it. Edith and the security manager provided principled leadership, through their responsible and supportive actions and by being fair and compassionate in doing their jobs.

The bottom line is that ethics will not just happen by itself. Sound leadership is needed to define the desired ethical standards and then to institutionalize them throughout the organization. This can't be outsourced. Leaders have to take responsibility, address ethical issues and turn principles into action. That is what principled leadership is all about.

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other OECD countries to pass legislation making it illegal to bribe foreign government officials or their agents. There is also a new, voluntary *International Code of Ethics for Canadian Business*, which could be supported by the profession.

The profession could also provide more support and encouragement for aspiring to excellence in the teaching of engineering ethics in university engineering faculties. What better way to instill principles in the future leaders of our profession? ◆

Jim Ridler, P.Eng., is principal of James G. Ridler and Associates in Lansdowne, Ontario, and director of the Canadian Centre for Ethics and Corporate Policy. He coordinates the professional practice and ethics course for the Professional Development Centre (Engineering) at the University of Toronto and teaches business ethics at Queen's University.