

Project Ethics: What in the World is Going On?

Kathie York

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Abstract

This paper addresses the concept of ethics in business as it relates to the world of project management. Unlike most researchers, the author does not simply define ethics and show immoral companies/practices vs. moral. She considers the “Why?” of this document’s necessity. She posits ideas on how the United States set the stage for its moral decline and how we, as PMs, must deal with and manage through the consequences.

NOTES:

Due to its nature, this document is not written in strict APA format.

“Manager” refers to those in a project situation and can be Functional Area or Project Managers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
What happened?.....	1
Exploring Ethics.....	1
PMI’s Code of Ethics and the Real World.....	2
Ethics in Project Situations	3
Are Families Part of the Problem?	4
Does God Make a Difference?	5
Have Schools Advanced Ethics Problems?.....	5
How Does This Affect Us as Project Managers?.....	6
Is it our Job to Teach Morality?	6
What are Our Options?	7
Conclusion	8
Epilogue	9
Bibliography	10

Ethics: What in the World is Going On?

It is 1711 in (what will become) America. Or, it is 1811 in America. Even if it were **1911** in America – before the first ethics course (Hudson, p. 455) – and your professor at William and Mary College asked you to write a paper on ethics in business, you would wonder: what could you possibly say about ethics to fill a research paper?

Fast forward to 2011 in America. For years, publications and broadcast news have been filled with stories such as Enron cooking its books, Bernie Madoff duping investors, and children disappearing when they became inconvenient to their parents.

What happened?

What happened between the time Christians came to this country seeking religious freedom and “the now” of corruption and unethical behavior? Small changes in our ethical way of life, over time, were ignored or thought unimportant. As a society, we are reaping what we have sown. In the movie “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” Ferris and his buddies skip school and wreak havoc for several hours. In this 1986 film, there were no consequences for the behavior. “Ferris” would not have made it into theaters in **1946**.

In the 1978 play-turned-film “Same Time, Next Year,” theatergoers watched a couple as they committed adultery over 25 years. Had the play been released in **1878**, theatergoers would have stayed away in droves. Sadly, adultery did not bother us too much in **1978**.

Exploring Ethics

The first known use of the word “ethic” was in the 14th century (Merriam, p. 1), but I was unable to discover when it first appeared in a dictionary. “Ethic” originates from the Latin “ethicus” which means “moral.” Someone’s ethics or ethical standards revolve around their

view of right and wrong...their morals (World Book, 1990). Note the World Book dictionary equates “ethic” and “moral,” and I will do the same in this paper.

PMI’s Code of Ethics and the Real World

The Project Management Institute’s (PMI) *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct* is now a worldwide standard for project behavior. PMI states the four values project managers (PMs) find most important are: responsibility, respect, fairness, and honesty.

Howard Smallowitz and George Stark published an article, in the June 2011 edition of PMI’s *PM Journal*, that fits very well with the four important values. Smallowitz and Stark offer “Heaven ... or Hell? The Seven Deadly Sins of Project Estimating.” If we combine portions of this article with the PMI four values, it becomes a real-world look into ethics:

- Responsibility: (Sin #1 – Greed): As team members, we cannot fall into the fear trap. We should be forthcoming with our data and not hoard information.
- Respect: (Sin #4 – Wrath): The authors mention a manager who became angry when disagreeing with analysis results. We must work diligently on our diplomacy skills and showing respect to coworkers.
- Fairness: (Sin #2 – Gluttony): It is tempting to pad estimates, but if everyone does that, we may miss out on a contract! In all fairness, we should carefully estimate our “go wrong” factors but not become gluttonous.
- Honesty: (Sin #6 – Pride): In a funny moment, the authors mentioned they used to rebaseline if they knew they could not make a goal. It looked better if

they finished “on time.” They state, “...we’ve reworked our estimating process several times. At last count, we were on version 15.1”

In all likelihood, we know people who fall into these four “sins.”

Ethics in Project Situations

Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn posit we need “ethics mindfulness” – an enriched awareness – when conducting business (pp. 16-17). Managers should behave morally in all decisions and communicate that expectation to the staff. Scholar Archie B. Carroll states there are three types of managers, the third being the kind Schermerhorn and his co-authors applaud (Schermerhorn, et. al, 2008, p. 16):

- Immoral: looks only for “What’s in it for me?”
- Amoral: well-meaning, but does not consider the ethical impact of decisions
- Moral: ethical is “who he is”

An example of the manager Carroll feels is in the majority – the amoral – could easily be any of my MSPM classmates or me. In this age of bribery, most American companies’ policy on gifts is very strict. Usually, when we do business abroad, we follow the U.S. rules (Rue & Byars, 2007, p. 120). I understand drawing this line. However, in my opinion, this ethical imperialism – adhering to your home country’s ethics instead of the host country’s (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2006, p. 318) – can stifle some opportunities.

For example, business transactions in China include sumptuous meals: the first usually by the Chinese host, the second by the visitor (Rue & Byars, 2007, p. 108). An American PM is at a

disadvantage during negotiations if he keeps to U.S. ethics rules. This is an instance where a manager could, in all (amoral) innocence, create an unethical situation by simply being polite.

Are Families Part of the Problem?

I briefly posit three items I feel have helped lead us to an increasingly immoral society with the undisciplined people who populate our teams:

- Americans bought into the myth they needed 2.5 kids, a big house, monster TV, fancy car, and a house on the lake. This meant *both* parents had to work and
 - No one was home to provide guidance after school
 - Neither parent had enough time for their children
- Many women in this country decided they could run a household on their own
- Divorced and/or absent fathers are increasingly the norm.

The crux of the recent film *Courageous* trumpets this message: fathers must *be* fathers. In a documentary on the movie's website, director/producer Alex Kendrick mentions, "The importance of the father in the home is crucial to the health of the family" (Kendrick, 2011, video timestamp beginning at :50). Dr. Kevin Ezell adds: "The reason kids are like they are in school and the way they are in society is because the family unit's broken down. When the father's not there, everything else begins to crumble."

Even in animal families and groups, the "Y" chromosome is important. For example, the bull elephant is central to teaching the young males the difference between defense and senseless altercation. Although matriarchal, herds tend to be less aggressive if a bull is present.

Does God Make a Difference?

I was fortunate to grow up in a godly family. The parents and grandparents were model citizens and their children are fine, upstanding adults and productive members of society. So far, at least, there is not one immoral second cousin among them! Another family's story, with which I am familiar, is radically different. They had an absent-father-of-sorts who lived in the home. The children were reared hearing "You'll never amount to anything," or "I can't believe I have such a stupid kid." This was the least of the abuse. There was no base for security and, with assistance from their mother, the children learned to lie to Dad just to keep the peace.

Unfortunately, these kids came along at a time they were not allowed to hear godly principles and sentiments expressed at school and – according to my friend – they were "...ripped out of church because someone didn't do something Dad's way. That was right when it would have made a big difference in our lives, no matter how he treated us at home." Terrible repercussions have filtered down to two siblings' families, one of whom I will mention, later.

Have Schools Advanced Ethics Problems?

Many American public schools, in their own way, foster the same helpless feeling. In 1647, our public schools began their journey with the Bible as a textbook. Until 40 years ago, the "old" spellers, history books, and readers – based on Christian principles – were used by U.S. educators (Strand, video timestamp beginning at 2:55). Replacement began in the 1960s.

Whether a person believes in God or not, was it really such a bad thing to have a plaque in schools reminding children to refrain from obsessing on earthly things, lying, cheating, stealing, disrespecting their elders, or breaking their promises to others? How has banning God made our country *better*? It certainly has not left it a moral nation.

An increasingly permissive society has hastened the decline in the United States. Many Baby Boomers reared slackers who are intolerant “Gimmes,” expecting everything handed to them. In the unfortunate family mentioned earlier, a nephew (a highly trained and in-demand male Registered Nurse) turned to stealing drugs from his employer to snuff out a world he thought expected too much from him. It has been a rough road as the immoral creeds of lie/cheat/steal (his mother continued some traditions from *her* family) have become his way of life ... now homeless and on the streets. As an interesting side note: from the age of 13 years, this young gentleman lived with a permissive mom after losing his dad – at a critical juncture – in his parents’ divorce.

How Does This Affect Us as Project Managers?

Although we, as PMs, may work on international undertakings, let us assume for the moment we deal only with Americans. If they have been in public schools and/or reared in a non-supportive environment, employees may have been inundated with ideas and ideals we must combat. We know many people now have a sense of entitlement. It often begins with “What can you do for me, Mr. Employer?” and spills over into other thought processes it falls to us to turn around. These include (Young, 2011):

- “Morals” from Immanuel Kant: *you* decide what is right and wrong
- Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of a superhuman, embraced by Adolf Hitler: if you get enough power, you will be right. Might makes right. Climb that ladder.

Is it our Job to Teach Morality?

How do we find time, as PMs, to teach values to the weak-conscience crowd? Partly, we can teach by example. Our parent firm might also help if it has mandatory ethics training or publishes a code of ethics outlining principles-to-live-by when making company decisions (Rue

& Byars, 2007, p. 114). According to Carroll & Buchholtz (2006), codes of ethics are a phenomenon of the past 30 years¹. Their research shows the top five reasons for using the codes, since 1981, are (pp. 242-243):

- Providing legal protection for the firm
- Instilling employee pride and loyalty (“My company follows a code of ethics.”)
- Garnering public good will
- Improving loss prevention
- Reducing bribery and kickbacks

The final two bullets are a sad commentary on our country. We have beaten down our consciences. They do not prick us, any more. If the reader takes a moment to “do the math,” he will find an interesting correlation to the 30 year time-frame and the year biblical principles began disappearing from U.S. public places in 1962 (Oyez, 2001: *Engle v. Vitale*):

2011 – 30 years = 1981

1981 – 1962 (*Engle v. Vitale*) = 19 years

A child in the first grade in 1962 joined the workforce with a very different school background than his parents.

What are Our Options?

As people move further away from the idea of doing what is right simply *because* it is right, we deal with team members who might cave to “meeting the numbers.” Jennings (2009) addresses this as pressures/signals and suggests otherwise moral individuals might bend the rules

¹ The text states “25 years.” I have updated the number to include the five years since the book was published.

to meet goals: “It’s for the greater good. We’ll do this to fix the problem and no one will know the difference.” Much like our MSPM course on managing projects in different cultures, we should be aware of this subculture within our own country.

As PMs, we must communicate the importance of being honest and forthcoming about issues as they arise. Surprises are not an option.

Conclusion

There are very gifted, moral workers in the marketplace. We must find and nurture them. As Project Managers, we sometimes make difficult decisions about personnel and our mission. In my opinion, we humans learn best from what we see and can emulate. Our teams should know we never compromise what is right. If nothing else, we can (forgive the cliché) look ourselves in the mirror knowing we set a good example.

In the words of Joyce Meyer, one of my favorite inspirational speakers, “They won’t even know they’re thinking wrong if they don’t have anything right to compare it to.”

Are we up to the comparison challenge?

Epilogue

(Meyer, 2011, video timestamp 5:45-9:34)

As I was completing this paper, I discovered an interview that was personally uplifting to me. I share some of the concepts, here. For the past 15 years, public school boards across America have been adding an elective credit course, from the National Council on Bible Curriculum, to their schools. It teaches the cultural impact of the Bible, how it has influenced history and literature, and the fact that it is the foundation of western culture.

Mr. Ben Kinchlow, a member of NCBC's board, explains "[The purpose is to] teach morality and that there is a such a thing as right and wrong...If we take the Bible and its perspective out of our society, we have no history on which to build our nation. Our country was built on ... Biblical principles."

Mr. Kinchlow further states that over 400,000 students in more than 600 school districts have now been exposed to ethics and morality teaching in at least one place that impacts their daily lives: school. Let us hope some of these students populate our projects!

*"The philosophy in the
school room in one
generation will be the
philosophy in government
in the next"*

- Abraham Lincoln

Bibliography

- American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Carroll, A.B., & Buchholtz, A.K. (2006). *Business & society: Ethics and stakeholder management* (6th ed.). Mason, OH: South-Western.
- Kendrick, A. & Kendrick, S. (Producers) & Kendrick, A. (Director). (2011). *Heart of Courageous.* [Documentary]. United States: Tri-Star Pictures. Retrieved from <http://www.courageusthemovie.com/videos-heartofcourageous>
- Donahue, L. (n.d.). How to write an ethics paper. eHowFamily. Retrieved September 24, 2011 from http://www.ehow.com/how_5089773_write-ethics-paper.html
- (The) College of William and Mary homepage (2011). <http://www.wm.edu/>
- Hudson, J. W. (1912). The aim and content of the first college course on ethics. *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 9, No. 17, 455.
- Jennings, M. (2009). *Business: Its legal, ethical, and global environment* (8th ed.). Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning.
- Merriam-Webster website. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethic>
- Meyer, J., (2011). *God, America, and you.* Interviews with Alliance Defense Fund, National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, and Family Research Council. Retrieved from http://joycemeyer.org/BroadcastHome.aspx?video=God,_America_and_You
- Oyez Project, The. (2011). *Engle v. Vitale (1962)*. Retrieved from U.S. Supreme Court Media, IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law: http://www.oyez.org/cases/1960-1969/1961/1961_468/
- Project Management Institute website: <http://www.pmi.org/>

- Project Management Institute. (2011). *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
- Rossiter, J. (2007). *The APA pocket handbook: APA rules for format & documentation*. DWPublishingCo.com (no city/state provided): DW Publishing Co.
- Rue, L.W., & Byars, L.L. (2007). *Management skills and application* (12th ed.). New York, NY: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.
- Schermerhorn, J.R., Hunt, J.G., & Osborn, R.N. (2008). *Organizational behavior* (10th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Smallowitz, H. & Stark, G. (2011). Heaven...or Hell? *PM Network*, 25, (6), 22-23.
- Strand, P. (video correspondent). (n.d.). *The bible: The foundation of liberty*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbn.com/media/player/index.aspx?s=/vod/PST33>
- (The) World Book Dictionary. (1990). Chicago, IL: World Book, Inc.
- Young, E. (9/18/2011). Discussion on ethics, *Winning Walk* television program.
- YouTube (6/21/2011). The age of the dictionary: The history of English. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7W7UgFxri8&feature=relmfumr>.