

Approaches to Ethical Decision Making
Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia (APEGBC)

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Introduction

Public trust

- “ Everyday, APEGBC members and licensees are trusted with work that involves inherent risk to public welfare, health and safety, the natural and increasingly the technological environment. This is because the public recognizes that engineering and geoscience professionals possess a combination of education, experience, training and practice that gives them the ability to engage in such work while at the same time safeguarding them against such risks.

Challenging conditions

- “ Due to the nature of their work, members and licensees are often required to make decisions and to act independently of consultation and supervision at times under considerable pressure. Increasingly, the projects and processes they are engaged in involve the challenge of finding a way to balance economic benefit and productivity with paramount concerns for human safety, public welfare and environmental protection.

Sound decisions

- “ The ability of engineering and geoscience professionals to bring their experience, integrity, and judgment to bear in such circumstances is grounded in a disciplined process for issue framing and decision making that is as important as it is in the more technical aspects of their work.

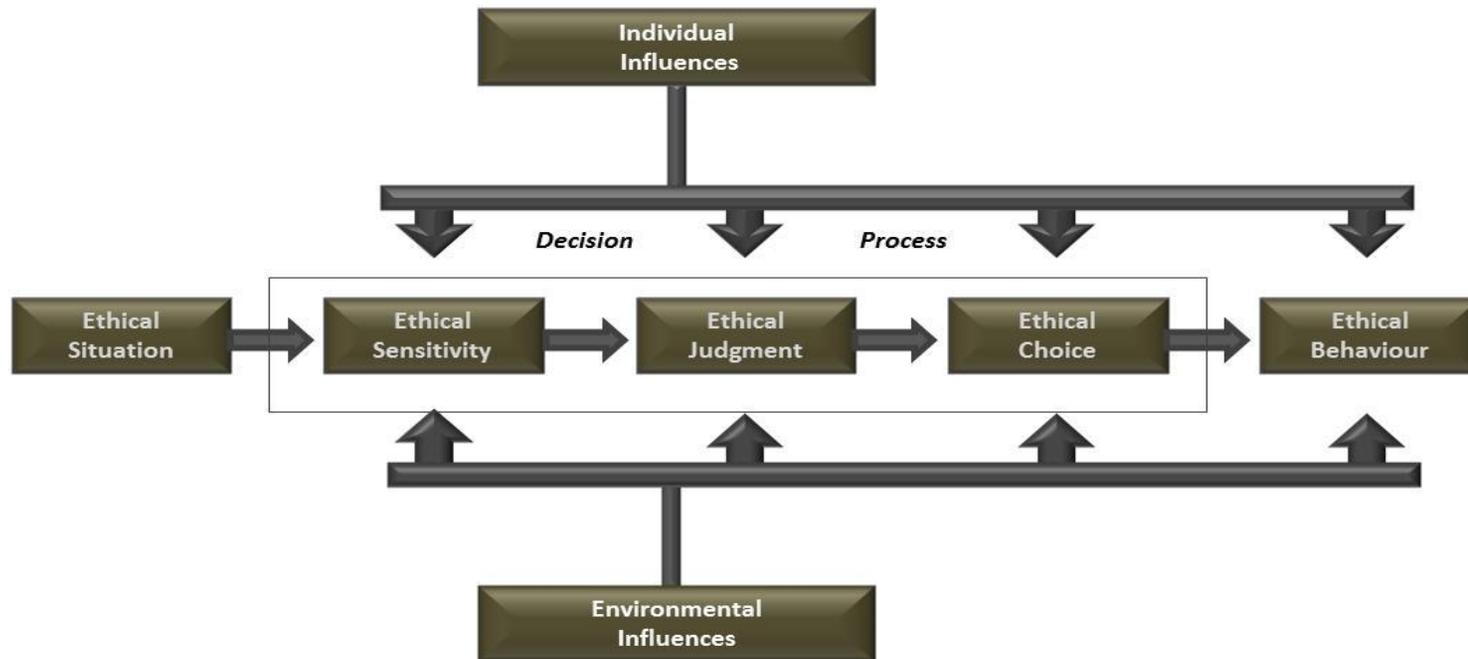
Is it ethical?

- “ As professionals, members and licensees must ensure their decisions and actions not only satisfy the rigours of scientific and technical testing and pass the compliance test that asks “is it legal?”, but also pass the test that asks “*is it ethical?*”
- “ Arriving at choices and decisions that pass the ethical test starts with an awareness and capacity to identify and address issues that have an ethical dimension or that raise ethical issues or concerns.
- “ An ethical choice or decision potentially arises every time a decision or action is considered or taken that has implications and consequences for others. Ethical decision making requires a conscious consideration of the implication and consequences of individual or collective choice or action and an evaluation of the costs, benefits and risks involved according to a set of fundamental values that include integrity, honesty, respect, trustworthiness, and concern for others.
- “ As in scientific and other analysis based disciplines, accurate identification and response are essential to sound and defensible problem solving and decision making.

Decision making in practice

Decision making and decision outcomes are subject to the influence of a range of individual factors and external influences at any stage of the process. Individual factors include such things as personal value systems and attitudes to compliant and law-abiding behaviour. External, or environmental influences include such things as an organizational culture of risk taking or working in locations that are remote from the influence of cultural norms.

The following **Wittmer model of ethical decision making*** illustrates how and where such factors enter into and influence the decision making process.



* Dennis P Wittmer, "Behavioural Ethics in Business Organizations: What the Research Teaches us", Good Business, 2010

The APEGBC Code of Ethics

The APEGBC Code of Ethics

The APEGBC Code is the foundation of ethical professional engineering and professional geoscience in BC. It establishes the over-arching standard of conduct expected of APEGBC members and licensees and identifies specific duties and responsibilities.

For members and licensees the Code also serves important practical functions in support of ethics at work, as a:

- “ tool for decision making
- “ consistent frame of reference and assurance as to the necessary standards of work
- “ review mechanism for dealing with conflicts and competing interests
- “ basis and channel for identifying, interceding in and, where necessary, reporting inappropriate conduct or practice
- “ deterrent for engaging in questionable, reputation damaging or risky practice.

Decision Making Tools

- “ There are various approaches for identifying and framing ethical considerations and issues that involve different degrees of rigor and complexity, depending on the nature and context of the issues or concerns. The following slides outline some of the different approaches to framing, making and testing decisions according to an ethical standard.

- “ These and other approaches can serve as guides to assist and support decision makers and their decision process. Using or referring to such approaches, is not a substitute or proxy for considered thought, due process and intention and it is important to remember that every situation has a distinct set of factors and circumstances that necessitate some flexibility and latitude to yield the best possible result.

- “ Ultimately, the quality of decision making is a product of individual character and commitment and the responsibility for decisions remains with the decision maker.

Decision making tools – self-tests

Approaches to ethical decision making can be a series of questions that the decision maker poses to themselves in order to test decisions according to their own personal as well as professional and societal standards.

Self-assessment test:

- “ Is it legal?
- “ Is it honest?
- “ Is it consistent with the Code of Ethics and professional conduct standards?
- “ Do I feel uncomfortable with this issue or situation?
- “ What would I feel if it appeared in the news or online?

8 part test:

- “ **Values Test:** Does it fit with value expressed?
- “ **Safety Test:** Does it pose a risk and/or potentially endanger, or injure?
- “ **Law Test:** Does it comply with/meet legal requirements, policies and standards?
- “ **Conscience Test:** Does it accord with my personal values?
- “ **Newspaper Test:** Does the thought of my decision being public make me uncomfortable?
- “ **Family Test:** Does it set an example I would want for my children/that I would want my family to judge?
- “ **Gut Test:** Does it feel right?
- “ **Community Test:** What would happen if everyone behaved like this?

Decision making tools – Congress ETHIC decision making model

Ethical decision making necessitates consideration of the implications and consequences of potential decisions on those who might foreseeably be affected now and in the future.

The following decision making model outlines steps to take in preparation for making a decision that is ethical, informed and based on thorough consideration of potential impacts and outcomes.

Congress ETHIC Decision Making Model

- “ **E** : Examine personal, professional, client, agency, societal values

- “ **T** : Think about the applicable ethical standards, laws and legal precedents that apply

- “ **H** : Hypothesize different decisions, their outcomes and the impact on relevant systems

- “ **I** : Identify who will benefit and who will be harmed by these specific decisions keeping in mind professional values and mission

- “ **C** : Consult

Decision making tools – the ‘scientific method’

Some models take an approach to the process of identifying and addressing ethical issues similar to that which guides the scientific method of inquiry.

They start with the initial recognition that an issue or problem exists, followed by investigation into its nature and circumstances that, ideally, includes a range of perspectives to increase insight and limit bias. This leads to the development of a proposed approach or response based on the relevant findings that is then reviewed and tested before implementation and subsequent evaluation of the results.

‘Scientific Method’ for Evaluating the Ethical Course of Action*

- “ **Observation:** the recognition of a problem or conflict.

- “ **Inquiry:** a critical consideration of the facts and the issues involved.

- “ **Hypothesis:** the formulation of a decision or plan of action consistent with the known facts.

- “ **Experimentation and Evaluation:** the testing, implementation and assessment of a decision or plan in order to see if it leads to the resolution of the problem.

**Adapted from: Al Gini, “Moral Leadership and Business Ethics”, Ethics and Leadership Working Papers (Academy of Leadership Press, 1996).*

Decision making tools – professional decision making framework

Each of the stages from the initial issue or problem identification, through analysis and response involve making assumptions, forming opinions and reaching conclusions that involve judgment as well as fact.

As in all other exercises of judgment and discretion, members and licensees are expected and relied upon to act professionally and in accordance with the APEGBC Code of Ethics.

Professional Decision Making Framework

- “ **Recognize:** Recognize an issue or concern and the duty to act or become involved.
- “ **Define:** Define the problem - including the principles, standards, and values involved - and identify fundamental objectives as well as potential conflicts and risks;
- “ **Review:** Consider a range of possible alternatives and associated outcomes;
- “ **Analyse:** Gather and evaluate information, with a view to forming an impartial, unbiased assessment and balanced decision;
- “ **Decide:** Reach a conclusion as to the proposed course of action, having given due consideration to the implications and consequences of that approach compared to others.
- “ **Test:** Where possible, discuss or review decisions before implementation, having regard to confidentiality, individual rights, fairness and due process;
- “ **Act:** Take decisive action, bearing in mind that a decision not to act is subject to the same standards of conduct as any action taken.
- “ **Record:** Articulate and document the rationale for the decision and action.