

Ethics in the workplace

A learning organisation is rife with ethical dilemmas. What's the difference between instruction and coercion? Work-based learning – whether driven from above or bubbling up from below – implies an asymmetry of power. “The boss says so, so I gotta do it”, or “we really want to do this, but we’re not sure about corner office support, so we’ll make politically-correct adjustments.” Resolving those asymmetries is deeply ethical.

If you’re making widgets, this might not be much of an issue, but if it’s patient care, or political outcomes, then it might be life saving or community enhancing. It can certainly be career-limiting. And it’s all about ethics – what’s right, and why.

So what are the general principles? What’s ethical, and what is not?

Ethics may be defined as a method, procedure, or perspective for deciding how to act and for analysing complex problems and issues. Different disciplines, institutions, and professions have norms for behavior that suit their particular aims and goals. These norms also help members of the discipline to coordinate their actions or activities and to establish the public's trust of the discipline. For instance, ethical norms govern conduct in medicine, law, engineering, and business. Ethical norms also serve the aims or goals of research and apply to people who conduct scientific research or other scholarly or creative activities.

Why do ethics matter?

1. A sound ethical basis promotes knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error
2. Ethical standards promote the values that are essential to collaborative work: trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness ...
3. ... and ensure that people can be held accountable; for misconduct, conflicts of interest, and to ensure spenders of public money are accountable to the public
4. Robust ethics build public support. Funders or sponsors are more likely to support projects or interventions they trust
5. Ethical research promotes a variety of other important moral and social values, such as social responsibility, human rights, animal welfare, compliance with the law, and health and safety.

What are the generic principles? Trawling some on-line references, a summary is:

1. Honesty – in data, results, methods and procedures, and publications. Do not fabricate, falsify, or misrepresent data
2. Objectivity – avoid bias in learning design, data analysis, data interpretation, peer review, personnel decisions, grant writing, and expert testimony. Disclose personal or financial interests
3. Integrity – keep your promises and agreements; act with sincerity; strive for consistency of thought and action
4. Carefulness – avoid careless errors and negligence; carefully and critically examine your own work and the work of your peers. Keep good records,

- such as data collection, research design, and correspondence
5. Openness – share data, results, ideas, tools, resources. Be open to criticism and new ideas
 6. Respect for intellectual property – honor patents, copyrights, and other forms of IP. Use unpublished data, methods, or results with permission
 7. Confidentiality – protect confidential communications, such as papers or grants submitted for publication, personnel records, trade secrets, and patient records
 8. Responsible publication – publish in order to advance research and scholarship, not to advance your own career
 9. Responsible mentoring – educate, mentor, and advise workmates, employees, and other workplace stakeholders
 10. Respect your colleagues – and treat them fairly
 11. Social responsibility – promote social good and prevent or mitigate social harms through research, public education, and advocacy
 12. Non-discrimination – avoid discrimination ... on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, or other factors
 13. Competence – maintain and improve your own professional competence and expertise through lifelong education and learning
 14. Legality – know and obey relevant laws and institutional and governmental policies

Acknowledging JF Peterson, Deborah Smith, and David Resnick.

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Sunday, March 30, 2014
603 words