InFocus | *Bridging the Ethical Chasm*

By Barry Arnold, P.E., S.E., SECB

Is our Code of Ethics relevant today, or has its strength faded with time? Is our Code of Ethics a powerful tool to assist and guide the engineer in being a professional and in making good and right decisions, or is it outdated dogma?

Recently, an engineer with animated gestures and passion in his voice proclaimed, "We, as professionals, are duty bound and morally obligated to understand, live by, and enforce the Code of Ethics." With equal commitment, another engineer stated "The Code of Ethics is an outdated albatross that hangs around the neck of the profession and limits opportunities."

A third engineer provided a different perspective, "This rift has now grown into a chasm of sorts. A divide that will be difficult to fill or bridge so the profession can join together on common ground." He concluded by saying, "The Code of Ethics feels, to some, like a dog without a bark or bite. Obedience is considered optional because the worst that can happen for a violation, in most cases, is for the engineer to be removed from the professional organization."

Although I understand all three perspectives, I align myself with the first engineer. The Code of Ethics is a powerful document that reminds me of my obligations to my fellow engineers, to the profession, and most importantly, to society. The etymology of the word "professional" provides the foundation for this belief, and the definition provides the passion and commitment.

> The etymology and historical meaning of the term "professional" is from Middle English, from *profes*, adjective, having professed one's vows from Anglo-French; from Late Latin *professus*, from Latin, past participle of *profitēri* to profess, confess, from *pro-* before + *fatēri* to acknowledge; in other senses, from Latin *professus*, past participle. *Thus, as people became more and more specialized in their trade, they began to 'profess' their skill to others, and 'vow' to perform their trade to the highest known standard. With a reputation to uphold, trusted workers of a society who have a specific trade are considered professionals*. (Wikipedia, italics added)
>
> A professional is a member of a profession or any person who earns their living from a specified professional activity. The term also describes the standards of education and training that prepare members of the profession with the particular knowledge and skills necessary to perform their specific role within that profession. *In addition, most professionals are subject to strict codes of conduct, enshrining rigorous ethical and moral obligations. Professional standards of practice and ethics for a particular field are typically agreed upon and maintained through widely recognized professional associations*… Some definitions of "professional" limit this term to those professions that serve some important aspect of public interest and the general good of society. (Wikipedia, italics added).

Even though the term professional has been hijacked and misused by occupations claiming to be professionals, for those practicing in true professions (those serving some important aspect of public interest and the general good of society), the requirement is clear. Professional standards of practice and ethics are agreed upon and maintained by our professional associations. The Code of Ethics sets the standard for the engineering profession. The Code of Ethics applies to all engineers, not just those who belong to an engineering association.

The Code of Ethics is a valuable resource, and provides and defines our professional duties, obligations, and responsibilities to each other and the profession; but it is also much more. It can be viewed as a type of agreement with society that engineers will conduct themselves like professionals. A hint that this is so can be found in The Fundamental Principles of both NCSEA's and ASCE's Code of Ethics. They are similar in requiring that:

Engineers uphold and advance the integrity, honor, and dignity of the engineering profession by:

1) using their knowledge and skill for the enhancement of human welfare and the environment;
2) being honest and impartial and serving with fidelity the public, their employers and clients;
3) striving to increase the competence and prestige of the engineering profession; and
4) supporting the professional and technical societies of their disciplines.

Although the Fundamental Principles can be, and often are, read as an agreement between professional engineers (engineers agreeing to a universal standard of conduct), they can also be read and understood to be the professional engineer's contract with society. The Fundamental Principles inform society regarding what they can expect from the profession and define the areas the profession will promote, magnify, and defend. In a sense, the Fundamental Principles justify to society why engineers should be considered professionals.

I believe that without the Code of Ethics – our agreement with society – engineers could become an albatross hanging around society's neck. Without this agreement – without having these standards defined and enforced – engineering could become a pseudo-profession. Society has placed their trust in the engineering profession, and we should reciprocate by abiding by the standards of our profession – the Code of Ethics.

Is the Code of Ethics worn out, or are they the standards upon which a strong profession is built, as well as the foundation for a successful career? What are your thoughts? What does the Code of Ethics mean to you? Would you like to share your ideas? The discussion continues at **www.STRUCTUREmag.org**.▪

*Barry Arnold (**barrya@arwengineers.com**) is a Vice President at ARW Engineers in Ogden, Utah. He chairs the STRUCTURE magazine Editorial Board and is the Immediate Past President of NCSEA and a member of the NCSEA Structural Licensure Committee.*