Integrity and Ethical Behaviour

by Engr. Mohamed Zaimir bin Mohamed Suffian

Question: Engineers are often entrusted with the responsibility of implementing large scale projects involving millions of ringgit. In view of the large amount of money changing hands, the integrity and ethical standards of engineers are being put to test. What measures can an engineer take to prevent corruption and unethical practice of cutting corners in order to safeguard the good image of the engineering profession?

ENGINEERS invent the future. Their works invariably affect the lives of people and their environment. Attaining the moral high ground in this profession is the prime focus in ascertaining the sanctity of the profession. In this regard, we are expected to be aware of, to recognise and to comply with the ethical aspects of engineering in techno-commercial dealings and business decisions when discharging our duties and fulfilling the expectations of stakeholders.

It is virtually impossible for engineers to not face challenges in upholding integrity and maintaining high ethical standards on a daily basis. We are, inevitably, involved in handling finances and holding commercially sensitive documents. When it comes to money, we must be aware of the measures for preventing possible corruption. Cutting corners and crossing ethical boundaries, whether deliberate or out of sheer ignorance, are examples of gross acts that need to be stamped out completely. In combining the objective of ensuring a good image within the engineering fraternity, the following steps can be taken:

1. NOT PARTICIPATING IN ANY DISHONEST ACTIVITY

Due to the pressure to maximise profit and ensure business survival, it is paramount to successfully bid for projects. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, there are instances when engineers participate in segmentation of market-areas between friends working in competitor organisations. This can lead to a cartel, which is a straightforward breach of the antitrust law. Market segmentation creates exclusivity within the demarcated territories and enables price fixing to effectively dismantle the free market.

Engineers must always subscribe to the free market enterprise system by competing openly, fairly and independently, based on merit i.e. superiority of technology offerings, intelligence of market benchmarking and smart pricing strategies. This will give customers a wider choice besides maintaining an improved quality and competitiveness in pricing at each time of offering. The objective is to protect the interests of consumers and ensure entrepreneurship. Engineers should avoid such 'traps' at all costs as history has shown that it never pays to conduct businesses this way.

In essence, antitrust practices and conflict of professional interest cases can be mitigated through mere actions of avoidance, refusal and structured disclosure. The golden rule is to be responsible at all times by proactively distancing oneself from any inappropriate conduct.

2. REPORT ANY ACTIVITY SUSPECTED TO BE DISHONEST AND TO SEEK GUIDANCE

Whistle-blowing of corrupt and malpractice within the organisation gained momentum when Parliament passed the Whistleblower Protection Act in late 2010, part of the many major initiatives under the Corruption National Key Results Area (NKRA) of the Government Transformation Programme (GTP).

In many cases, information can be sensitive, leading to potential harm to the whistleblower. Many organisations committed to the highest standard of integrity, openness and accountability in the performance of their businesses have acknowledged the need for a robust avenue for disclosure or reporting concerns of any act of misconduct within the organisation through strictly confidential and safe avenues.

The engineers however, should exercise fine judgment and a clear conscience when dealing with non-compliance cases even though they are protected against retaliation under the law. This is simply because of respect, a profound moral value that needs to be upheld especially as cases concern colleagues and fellow industry players. Besides private, confidential documents, guarding such sensitive information e.g. compliance complaint against exposure into the public domain is also part of values that engineers should hold firmly to.

3. ABIDE BY THE ETHICAL CODE OF THE COMPANY CHARTER AND PROFESSIONAL INSTITUTION

The code of conduct consists of a set of values and sound behavioral attributes, setting the fundamental guidance for engineers to perform duties to the best of their ability within the contours of the laws and regulations. The set of obligations covers the complete spectrum of stakeholders, society, profession as well as the environment. Besides their company's integrity charter, engineers must also exercise zero tolerance for unethical behaviour as set forth by the local governing engineering bodies, (in the case of Malaysia, these are the Board of Engineers and Institution of Engineers). The code of conduct is therefore central to the way we protect, develop and sustain our reputation.

It is the innate responsibility of engineers to perform services only in their areas of technical competence and to be honest about skill-gaps as doing otherwise would lead to a compromise in engineering quality for the sake of economic advantage.

In addition, engineers are duty bound to not mislead about engineering matters to their employers, non-technical owners or fund managers which may result in financial loss, damage to reputation as well as injury and even death.

4. CONCLUSION – THE EQUATION: TECHNO-SKILLS + BUSINESS TARGET + PROFOUND ETHICS = SUCCESS

The increasingly demanding roles of engineers to meet the business target must be done without crossing the line with respect to business ethics, environment, health, safety and social standards. They must integrate ethical behaviour in their daily work attitude instead of treating it as an additional demand. Essentially, ethical considerations are to be built into the engineering practice. Above and beyond, integrity and compliance to the code of conduct should be the DNA of each and every engineer in fulfilling their duties, even during off-work. The ultimate challenge is to do the same when no one is watching or checking! ■

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