

Professional codes of ethics

“The world is all grown strange. [said Éomar.] ... How shall a man judge what to do in such times?”

“As he ever has judged,” said Aragorn. “Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men. It is a man’s part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house.”

— Tolkien, *The Two Towers*

Recall that a profession needs to regulate itself. Any profession is identified by its special expertise. Only members of that profession, then, can assess what is and is not appropriate practice. Such self-regulation necessitates a *code of ethics* accepted by and **guiding**, not controlling, the behaviour of members of the profession. Guidance allows the flexibility (i) to respond in a unique way to unique circumstances and (ii) to adapt the profession’s practice in response to new knowledge and innovations. Prescriptive controls can only ever match ‘old’ answers to ‘old’ problems, not new ones. Any legal controls enforced on a profession provide a very limited, ‘minimum’ standard of behaviour, and do not provide the comprehensive, flexible control that would be sufficient by themselves. Laws can change only slowly. You may know how difficult it is to change a technical standard in response to an innovation.

To be adequate, a profession’s code of ethics needs to include an explicit commitment by the profession to the following FOUR things, at least. (Depending on the profession, there may be need for others.)

1. *The welfare of the client and / or wider public.*

This declares that the professional is working ‘on behalf of someone else’ and, thereby, protecting the interest of ‘another.’ The actions of a professional are not just looking after her/himself, unlike the action of a party to a business arrangement.

2. *Excellence in practising whatever it is that the profession actually does.*

This recognises the limitations and continuously evolving nature of professional practice, considering, for example, professional development.

3. *Being a trustworthy professional.*

This addresses such things as conflict of interest, confidentiality, not misrepresenting oneself, etc.

4. *Appropriate interpersonal behaviours, as an individual.*

This is about such things as not harassing people, avoiding rudeness, various forms of discrimination, etc.

Exercise: Does the 2010 *Code of Ethics* of Engineers Australia meet these requirements?

But what about a *code of conduct*? These are **derived** from the ethical principles. Most professions have codes of conduct, too, supplementing their codes of ethics, sometimes within the same documents (sometimes even merged into a single code).

Table 1: Codes of ethics; codes of conduct.

<i>code of ethics</i>	<i>code of conduct</i>
“should”	“must”
being good	being ‘safe’
ideals / general principles	rules: detailed & consistent
open-ended requirements	limited requirements
need judgment in each case	directive; fully prescribed
“responsibility”	“accountability”
in the end, voluntary	associated with punishments

Accepting responsibility means imaginatively considering possible outcomes and being aware of what **more** can be done for the well-being of others. This calls for greater awareness than does simple accountability. Accountability is limited to literal compliance with a process: “Has it been followed? yes/no?”

One aspires (or not) to live up to and is guided by ethical values. Success is never assured; absolute success unlikely. One obeys (or not) the specific rules of conduct. Whether one does or not is unambiguous.

References

Martin & Schinzinger; acknowledging Prof. Stephen Cohen