Ethical behaviour is defined by honesty, fairness, and equity (DEFINITION OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR, n.d.). Engineers Australia have created the Code of Ethics guidelines and ethical behaviour can be defined by four key characteristics. Demonstrating Integrity, Practise Competently, Exercise Leadership, and Promote Sustainability (Stuart-Watt, 2014). It is important for engineers to act ethically so that we can enrich the lives of the consumers that make use of our solutions and the engineering community as a whole.

When reflecting on the last ten weeks of training, a key situation that I have encountered within my team that stands out as an ethical dilemma. One of my team members was not responsive with communication, not contributing to in-class calls, and not assisting the team with any of the workload requirements. The ethical dilemma that I was faced with is around how to manage a poorly performing team member.

Firstly, I would like to dive deeper into my thought process of this situation, some of the actions I took, why I took them and my decision making behind that, and finally delve into the Code of Ethics from Engineers Australia and identify some similarities and changes I would make in future.

When looking at what happened, a team member halted nearly all work and was contributing around 0.5 – 1% of the workload in a team of 5. As the appointed leader of the group, which I took seriously and wanted to be a great role model for my team and propel us to a victory with a great grade for the subject, I was doing close to 50% of the workload. Given my personality, I did not have any ill feelings to the team given our disparity in application to the course. I wanted to do all I could to help us all succeed.

When the one team members workload began to dwindle, of which, they were already the weakest team member in terms of contribution, just furthered the gap, my immediate feelings I had were of frustration and anger, as they were capturing my hard work and claiming it as their own.

My first response was to try to utilise different techniques of leadership and communication to stifle a fire in their belly and try to improve their attitude towards the work, team and task at hand and help us out as a team more. As I could not be sure as to why this person was doing the things they were doing, I made assumptions that they were not attempting to cause pain or frustration on the team, but rather that they may not understand the content, or perhaps having difficulties from a personal point of view. Because of these assumptions, I acted with kindness towards the individual, trying to understand their point of view, called on them publicly but kindly within the group calls to spark contribution. Often the response was “I don’t know”, so I tried hard to understand the gaps of what they were failing to grasp and explain it to them in many ways to help them. This was not efficient, with the person contributing as little as possible and dragging out my assistance as long as possible with their little effort.

As the weeks continued, the individual stopped responding to call outs all together, and they became completely unresponsive in calls. They were “AFK” (Away from Keyboard) at all times. And would only unmute their microphone at the start of calls to say that they were eating food and would never return.

I began to lose patience and would begin to snap at the individual, barking that they would never contribute, and tell them that we are all very disappointed in the fact they are holding the team back from greatness when we are all trying. I would call the person out publicly and aggressively in the group chat with our team. There would be silence. I would try to inflict punishment upon him for his lack of enthusiasm and failure as a team member.

Unfortunately for this team member, it worked, and they began their work immediately and tried to do what they thought was being active. They completed their work first and asked for a review. The work was done to the lowest quality possible. It was rushed, fluffy, and untrue.

By that point I had had enough and sent a message to the unit convenor and tutor letting them know that I was having an issue with a team member. They acted quickly, and organised a private call, we spoke about the situation, and they let me know that it was good that I had let them know what was happening. I want to go into depth about my thought process around why I ultimately “went to the authority” and complained. This action is very out of character for me. I am very prideful and full of ego and believe that all conflict can be sorted when each party listens to the other and comes to a compromise. Or, in my situation, my team member compromises completely and does the work that is required of him…

The main thing that I was thinking about when making this decision of talking to the tutors was both myself and my team. We had worked hard. We had worked outside of class. Some of us, mostly myself, had worked into the hours of the night preparing our content so that our team would not fall behind. If our project ended up as a non-complete due to one person’s failure as a student, then we would all be punished, when only 1 person, in theory, should be. Given an assumption that the consequences of 1 member failure led to a project failure. On one side of the consequence scale, we have a total of 5 peoples time and money, and on the other we have just 1. Given this reasoning, I decided to complain about the student.

Now we have delved into the detail around the ethical dilemma I was faced with, the decision I made around that dilemma, the emotions I felt and the impact that would have had on the decision, and finally my deductive reasoning as to why I made the decision I did, I would now like to look at the literature of the Code of Ethics and identify some of the similarities and differences between my decision making and what the document recommends.

When making an analysis of my initial reaction to the situation as it was unfolding, I can identify that “Act on the basis of a well-informed conscience” (1.1) and “Maintained and develop knowledge and skills” (2.1) from the Code of Ethics can be applied (Code of Ethics and Guidelines on Professional Conduct, 2019). I believe that based on these 2 key points, I have acted ethically and appropriately, given that I had little understanding of situations this team member might be in and their external factors altering their behaviour, and also, I took the situation as an opportunity to teach this student as much as I could.

When analysing my behaviour and actions when I began to feel more frustration, I can identify “Make reasonable efforts to communication honestly and effectively to all stakeholders” (3.3) from the Code of Ethics can be applied (Code of Ethics and Guidelines on Professional Conduct, 2019). Here we can identify that my behaviour was unethical, and reacting with aggression towards a team member, regardless of circumstance, is inappropriate and is not classed as effective communication, regardless of honesty. In future, I will try my best to ensure that I do not act in an aggressive manor and find ways to keep the conversation for calm and to the point, ensuring I am communicating my concerns honestly and effectively to spark conversation and discussion, not arguments with lack of resolution and which amplify issues.

Finally, when analysing my behaviour and actions when making the decision to report the challenges we had been facing as a team, and myself as a leader, I can identify “Be honest and trustworthy” (1.2) and “Respect the dignity of all persons” (1.3) from the Code of Ethics can be applied (Code of Ethics and Guidelines on Professional Conduct, 2019). Given these, I can identify that the actions I have made were ethical as I was honest in my approach to myself and my team and made this decision with respect to the dignity of all persons, which included myself, my impacted team members, and the member in question. The action of talking to tutors gave that individual insight into the severity of the situation and gave them an opportunity to grow as a student, engineer and as a person. This decision was also beneficial to the rest of the team as this person’s lack of contribution would be considered when assessing the final product of the course, thus having a much smaller impact on our individual grades and benefitting the hard-working individuals.

Ultimately, when looking at the situation I faced throughout the last 10 weeks and over this course, we can see that it is important for engineers to act ethically to ensure that we are all treating each other with respect, improving the engineering community, and maximising our effectiveness and efficiency in both outcome and communication.

References

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