What is your work ethic?

Raymond E. Floyd

Some of you may question the title of this article as possibly being an oxymoron, but it isn't if you take a few minutes to think about it. In the intended context of the word *ethics*, the connection of work and ethics does not have a strong relationship to the IEEE Code of Ethics. In the latter case, the IEEE Code of Ethics deals with the responsibilities of each IEEE Member accepting an obligation to his or her chosen profession, including the commitment of the highest professional and ethical conduct possible. (For a look at the complete IEEE Code of Ethics, visit www.ieee.org/corporate/governance.) In the

particular context of this article, *work ethic* is concerned with the basic approach to the work assignments one is given, the acceptance of the assignment and responsibility for it, and the manner in which the end result is accomplished.

There are times in one's career that assignments will be given that just don't seem to be much fun, or at least not as much fun as others have been. It is in these situations that

one must demonstrate what type of work ethic one possesses. Did you work as hard as you normally would, completing the assignment in your best professional manner, or did you put forth a half-hearted work effort into completing the project—perhaps even finishing late rather than on time? In the first instance, you are demonstrating a strong work ethic, where success is measured in the accomplishment of the task in spite of the nature of the project. In the process of your accomplishment, you may wonder whether the results are worth the effort, but in the long run, that effort will be recognized and rewarded with new tasks that will bring self-satisfaction and career gains. That should be your goal in every assignment, to receive recognition of a job well done.

One may believe that given more money, the assignments won't matter. You are being paid enough to make the work, at a minimum, acceptable if not enjoyable. Once while teaching a leadership class, I commented that in a paper written by Abraham Mazlow, once certain fundamental things were gained, money no longer became the motivational factor that it had been (the lack of it could be a demotivator however). Factors such as recognition, job satisfaction, and others became more important to being successful in a career. A young engineer raised his hand and said, "If you pay me enough money, I'll be happy in whatever job you give me. Money is the most important motivation factor to me." I asked him what he thought would be enough money to make him happy regardless of the assignment. He thought about it for a minute or so and said, "$250,000 a year would be a reasonable amount for any assignment." I told him I would go to the Salary Administration Department and get that approved, the caveat being that I got to decide on the job.

The next day we continued the class, but I started with the description of the job that I had determined for the young engineer. His new assignment was to report to the men's room each morning, dressed as he normally would (pin-stripe suit, white shirt, narrow tie). When a person came in and used the facilities, he would then scrub the used facility to make sure it was clean and ready for the next user. The young engineer thought about this assignment for about 30 s and said, "I don't think I asked for enough money!" Needless to say, after a burst of laughter, the class got the point. While it wasn't a scientific study, it makes the point that money is probably not the cure-all for job dissatisfaction.

Come on, get happy!

In another example, I once had a young engineer working for me as a diagnostic programmer, writing test programs used for debugging system failures. He had been with the company for about ten years, had progressed at a reasonable rate of advancement, receiving regular salary increases and everything looking like a normal progression. However, he just didn't seem to be a happy person, frequently complaining about trivial problems, making deliveries on time or just a day or so late, and being more of a loner than a team player. During a counseling session, I noted to him that he didn't seem to be very happy in doing his job. He said that he hated doing the programming and engineering work! When I asked him why he continued to do it, his response was, "It pays well." I suggested to him that he needed to think about what it was that would make him happy and enjoy his work and life. The next day he handed me a letter of resignation, saying that he had reached a decision he had wanted to pursue years before—he was headed to a monastery to become a priest! That had been his wish for many years, in essence his life's work desire.

And finally, an example from my personal experience. From 1966 to 1970, I was involved with the Apollo lunar program, working at the Kennedy Space Center in support of the Saturn launch vehicle. The majority of the engineers assigned to that particular project were all rated as being "professional," meaning, by government definition, we were exempt from overtime pay. During some periods, a work week might consist of only 50 h, but in others, during tests and launch activities, 100 h-plus in a week could be the norm. Some may say that we were being exploited, but if you asked any of the engineers involved, nothing could be further from their mind.

The work was thrilling, leading-edge technology, recognized around the world, and all of the other accolades that one could ask for in one's career—nothing could be more rewarding. Another aspect of the Apollo program that resulted in much success in one's career was the development of the team concept. If one company had a problem during a test or launch activity, no one was interested in pointing fingers at it and sitting around waiting for it to solve the problem. It was "our" problem, and everyone offered whatever assistance they could to solve the problem and move forward. It was one of the biggest team efforts in which I ever had the honor of serving.

It made me feel good to know that I had demonstrated the strong work ethic instilled in me over the years by my father. In his words, "If you are being paid to do a job, do it to the best of your ability, accepting the responsibility for the results. If you are not willing to do that, don't accept the job." He also told me that if I did a job, I had to be willing to put my name on it as the responsible person. That is one good sign of your satisfaction on any assignment. If you are willing to put your name on it as the "author," then it has been done to the best of your ability and you are satisfied with the outcome.

As said by the famed author Ralph Waldo Emerson: Big jobs usually go to the person who proves their ability to outgrow small ones. Be that person that most frequently is given the hard tasks, the dirty jobs, the seemingly impossible schedules, because you have demonstrated a work ethic that says you will be successful every time. Enjoy your work and the rewards will come, all because you have demonstrated that strong work ethic.

About the author

Raymond E. Floyd earned a B.S.E.E. degree from Florida Institute of Technology in 1970, an M.S.E.E. degree from Florida Atlantic University in 1977, and a Ph.D. degree in industrial management from California Coast University in 2009. He spent six years with Philco Ford as a senior training instructor and 26 years with IBM, retiring in 1992 as a senior engineer. He is a Life Senior Member of the IEEE, a life senior member of the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, and holds four patents. He has served as a program evaluator for the Engineering Technology Accreditation Commission of ABET (ETAC/ABET) for 15 years and is a corresponding editor of *IEEE Potentials*.

P