

# Lecture 11.2 - Whistleblowers

CS 230  
Ethical Issues in Computing  
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BSU



# Announcements

- LA-8 retakes open
- LA-9 available
  - Quiz
  - Video Post
  - Challenges



# Last Time

- Computing Professions
- Software Engineering Code of Ethics
- Analysis of Code of Ethics

# Today

- Case Studies
- Whistleblowing



# Using Code of Ethics

- Identify relevant principles
- Select all applicable clauses
- Determine alignment
  - All clauses align => strong moral case
  - Mixed alignment => use judgment

# Case: Software Recommendation

- Sam Shaw asks for free advice on LAN security
- Prof. Smith answers questions and recommends top-ranked package
- Prof. Smith does not disclose ...
- She has financial interest in company producing top-ranked package
- Another package was given a “best buy” rating
- Did Prof. Smith do anything wrong?



# Analysis

- Most relevant principles
  - Be impartial.
  - Disclose information others ought to know.
  - Share your knowledge, expertise, and values.
- Clause 1.06: Prof. Smith was deceptive
- Clauses 1.08, 6.02: Prof. Smith freely gave valuable information
- Clauses 4.05, 6.05: Prof. Smith did not reveal conflict of interest

# Conclusion

- Professor Smith should have revealed her conflict of interest to Mr. Shaw.



# Case: Child Pornography

- Joe Green a system administrator
- Asked to install new software package on Chuck Dennis's computer
- Green not authorized to read other people's emails or personal files
- Green sees suspicious-looking file names
- He opens some of Dennis's files and discovers child pornography
- What should he do?

# Analysis

- Most relevant principles
  - Be impartial
  - Respect the rights of others
  - Treat others justly
  - Maintain your integrity



# Analysis

- Most relevant clauses
  - 2.03: Somebody has misused the company PC
  - 2.09: Someone is using the PC for a purpose not in the employer's interest
  - 3.13: Joe violated the policy against opening files
  - 5.10: Someone else may have planted the files on Chuck's computer

# Analysis

- Joe was wrong to violate company policy to uncover child pornography
- Once he has this knowledge, however, he is obliged to share it with company authorities
- Joe should be discreet



# Case: Anti-Worm

- Internet plagued by new worm that exploits hole in popular operating system
- Tim Smart creates anti-worm that exploits same security hole
- Tim's anti-worm fixes PCs it infects. It also uses these PCs as launch pad to reach new PCs.
- Tim launches anti-worm, taking pains to keep it from being traced back to him.
- The anti-worm quickly spreads through Internet, infecting millions of computers
- System administrators around the world combat the anti-worm

# Anti-Worm Analysis

- Most relevant principles
  - Continually improve your abilities.
  - Share your knowledge, expertise, and values.
  - Respect the rights of others.
  - Take responsibility for your actions and inactions.



# Anti-Worm Analysis

- Most relevant clauses:
  - 1.01: Tim did not accept responsibility for his action.
  - 1.08: The worm was free, but cost system administrators a lot of time.
  - 2.03: The anti-worm entered computers without permission of their owners.
  - 8.01, 8.02, 8.06: Tim improved his knowledge and skills by creating the anti-worm.

# Anti-Worm Analysis

- Tim's welfare is less important than the public good
- By attempting to hide his identity, Tim refused to accept responsibility for his actions
- Tim violated the property rights of the P C owners whose systems were infected by his anti-worm
- Tim violated the Code



# Case: Consulting Opportunity

- Jean works in support organization for Acme Corporation
- Many Acme customers downgrading their level of support
- East Dakota gives Jean opportunity to run a training class similar to that provided by Acme
- Jean tells no one at Acme
- Jean develops materials at home on own time
- Jean takes paid vacation to teach class

# Consulting Opportunity Analysis

- Most relevant principles
  - Be impartial.
  - Take responsibility for your actions and inactions.
  - Disclose information that others ought to know.
  - Maintain your integrity.
  - Continually improve your abilities.



# Consulting Opportunity Analysis

- Most relevant clauses
  - 3.04: Jean was well qualified to develop materials and teach class
  - 8.04: By creating materials, Jean became even more familiar with Acme's package and its capabilities
  - 4.05: Jean didn't disclose his conflict of interest with his employer
  - 2.08: Jean deprived himself of "time off" needed to do his best work at Acme
  - 6.05: Jean put his own interest above that of his employer

# Consulting Opportunity Analysis

- Jean did not disclose East Dakota's offer or his decision to Acme's management
- Acme's management is likely to question Jean's loyalty to the company
- Jean's actions were wrong and unwise



# Overview of Whistle-Blowing

- Whistle-blower
  - Tries to report harmful situation through authorized channels
  - Rebuffed by organization
  - Makes disclosure through unauthorized channels
- Whistle-blowers punished for their actions
  - Lose job or all chances of advancement
  - Financial and emotional hardship
- False Claims Act
- Whistleblower Protection Act

# The Challenger Explosion







# Case: Morton Thiokol/NASA

- Challenger explosion
- Roger Boisjoly and Morton Thiokol engineers documented dangers of low-temperature launches
- Morton Thiokol executives and NASA officials overrode and hid concerns
- Boisjoly shared information with Presidential commission
- Morton Thiokol retaliated
- Boisjoly took medical leave for stress, then quit
- Found job as a consultant two years later



# Case: Hughes Aircraft

- Factory for military-grade hybrid chips
- Some defective chips being approved
- Ruth Goodearl reported incidents to upper management
- Consequences for Goodearl
  - Harassed
  - Fired
  - Unemployment
  - Bankruptcy
  - Divorce
- Goodearl and Ruth Aldred sued Hughes Aircraft under False Claims Act and won

# Motives of Whistle-blowers

- People become whistle-blowers for different reasons
- Morality of action may depend on motives
- Good motive
  - Desire to help the public
- Questionable motives
  - Retaliation
  - Avoiding punishment



# Corporate Response to Whistle-Blowing

- Whistle-blowers are disloyal
- Whistle-blowing has many harms
  - Bad publicity
  - Disruption of organization's social fabric
  - Makes it hard for people to work as team
- If company causes harm, public can use legal remedies to seek damages
- Critique: Overly legalistic view of public harm?

# Whistle-Blowing as Organizational Failure

- Whistle-blowing harms organization
  - Bad publicity
  - Ruined careers
  - Erodes team spirit
- Whistle-blowing harms whistle-blower
  - Retaliation
  - Estrangement
- Organizations should improve communication
- Critique
  - Is this realistic?
- Robert Spitzer: Organizations should return to using principle-based ethics in decision making



# Whistle-Blowing as Moral Duty

- Richard DeGeorge's questions for whistle-blowing
  - Is serious harm to the public at stake?
  - Have you told your manager?
  - Have you tried every possible inside channel?
  - Do you have persuasive documented evidence?
  - Are you sure whistle-blowing will work?
- Under what conditions must you blow the whistle?
  - DeGeorge: If all five conditions are met
  - Others: If conditions 1-3 are met
  - Still others: Whistle-blowing is never morally required

# Moral Responsibility

- Exclusive Responsibilities
- Role responsibility
- Causal responsibility
- Legal responsibility
- Moral responsibility
  - Must be borne by people
  - Is not exclusive
- Michael McFarland: A team should be held to a higher level of moral responsibility than any of its members



# Summary

- Organizations should have policies and procedures in place so good principles can be upheld and issues can be resolved without whistle-blowing

# Next Time

- Review for final exam

