ENGR400 Ethics in Engineering and Science

Class 6 – Rights and Responsibilities of Engineers

Dear friends,

I hope you liked our first class about risks, safety and accidents. I have asked what responsibilites enginners had in each case of accidents already happened. This week we go a bit further with rights and responsibilities of engineers in cases of wrong-doing or contradictory practices regarding public good and safety.

We had already talked about responsibility of engineers and priorities among those responsibilities. An engineer might be an employee, a department head, a manager or an entrepreneur at his/her workplace. Each level has its own rights and responsibilities, and of course this chain of rights and responsibilities is not limited to workplace, but of concern to public and judicial authorities as well as trade unions, general public and other related civil society actors like Non-Governmental Organizations. This also includes us, education institutions and their professionals like myself, trying to prepare you for work life. When we talk about employer's responsibilities (e.g. for work or public safety measures), it's about business ethics; or lack of regulation and control by public institutions is about ethics in public administration. And when we talk about responsibility of the engineers, the measures they have to take, or the attitude they adopt when their due proposals are rejected by the employer, then we're talking about professional ethics.

Independent of professionalism and occupations, there are situations and turning points all across working life that could be analysed from the perspective of ethics. Both employers and employees have mutual responsibilities as well as employes towards other employees. We can talk about a contractual ethics here, though parties of this contract are not equal. Therefore ultimate responsibility for workplace organization belongs to the employer; still when we talk about work ethics, many resources emphasize the responsibilities of employees: "Doing their best" (efficiency, not wasting time,...), not disrupting peaceful work environment, not disclosing commercial secrets (confidentiality), avoiding conflict of interest etc. On the other hand, work security and safety, work-life balance of employees and decent work hours with compensation for extra hours, not obstructing trade union organisation and collective bargaining, fair wage and fair work for employee's qualities and capacities and nondiscrimination due to gender, sexual orientation, ethnic and religious identities, disability etc. are all employer's responsibilities. So what goes wrong for all the violations of these rights and responsibilities? A French sociologist, Annie Thebaud-Mony's book titled "Work is detrimental for health" points out to the externalisation of costs for employee well-being, health and security, resulting in both "accidents" (or murders as called by a Turkish platform for work security) and suicides, even in France as a developed country where unions are still strong. This is not only valid for blue collar workers of risky workplaces, but also white collar workers or professionals like engineers whose wages are cut and are forced to long hours of work within extremely competitive markets, as exhibited in a series of suicides in privatised telecom company of France (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/18/france-telecom-suicides-orange-bullying>).

Another problem that can find any employee at workplace is called mobbing. It's defined as mainly systematic, regular and “targeted” psychological violence at workplace and can take the form of disseminating gossip about a particular person, humiliation, creating a disturbing environment for work or delegating tasks unsuitable tasks for qualification. The term “targeted” means aiming and forcing the target to do something in particular like resigning, stepping down or conduct an action he/she is opposing. Of course, this particular action could also be illegitimate or even illegal. Prevention of mobbing is also employer's responsibility (but many of them are not prepared for this!). Many factors against prevention are mainly cultural to find these as natural facts of work life in a competitive environment. It also has a gender dimension (majority of the victims are women).

Gender inequality at the work place is another field requiring an ethical perspective, regarding "glass ceiling" against women's career path, pregnancy or even possibility of getting pregnant as an obstacle for recruitment, a cause for sacking or bullying for resignation, lower wages for same position, sexual harassment are among frequent problems. This is particularly true for engineering profession where still equal gender representation is very poor due to societal reproduction of the image of engineering as a “male job” mainly.

Finally, employee participation or workplace democracy is a popular term used by firms and demanded by employee organizations as well. The real meaning is open for questioning considering the ultimate decision authority and legal responsibility or liability of the employer: is the intention really participation of employees and shaping of worplace environment together, or a human resources tool to increase productivity, therefore profits, or even dispersing the responsibilities of employer and managers (by opportunity of telling 'we have decided for this all together' in case of any problem)? Could worker organizations like trade unions, chambers of engineers or other forms of established mutual accountability mechanisms be better replacements? Even white collar professionals, usually identifying themselves as individual career seekers rather than workers, started to get organizing after the economic crisis of 2008.

Again, we have a video and a reading for some detailed explanation for above mentioned (but itself very limited) issues about professional ethical practice and ethics in the workplace, which are reflected in rights and responsibilities of engineers. I enclose following main materials:

1) A link for the video of a TEDx talk about whistleblowing by Kelly Richmond Pope (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51k3UASQE5E)

2) Chapter 6 of book Engineering Ethics by Charles B. Fleddermann (without cases)

3) Another excellent piece on workplace cruelty, including violence and mobbing: <http://fortune.com/2013/04/23/how-to-control-workplace-cruelty/>

And you are expected to contribute to the forum discussion focusing on one of the cases of your choice latest until the end of 15th April Monday (23h59m):

Q) Think about Volkswagen emissions scandal (an explanation of the scandal can be found in: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-34324772> , and a uıpdated timeline including prison sentences towards managers and some engineers here: <https://environmentaldefence.ca/volkswagen-dieselgate-timeline/>). Consider you were an engineer in Volkswagen before the scandal happened or it was revealed. Choose one scenario below to respond to the question of “What would you do:

a) if you have discovered the opportunity of writing such a code, with potential benefits for the company and yourself, even if this meant cheating against laws?

b) if you were asked to write such a code as part of your task by your supervisers?

c) if you found out that some colleagues of yours have written the code and got approval to use it (but haven’t yet introduced it into the production)?

d) if you are suspicious that such a code is already in use for some time in some countries or even worldwide?”

All the best,

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