



## 6. Codes of Ethics

An aspect of professional societies that has not been mentioned yet is the codes of ethics that engineering societies have adopted. These codes express the rights, duties, and obligations of the members of the profession.

### 6.1. What is the code of ethics?

**Primarily**, a code of ethics provides a framework for ethical judgment for a professional. The key word here is “framework.” No code can be totally comprehensive and cover all possible ethical situations that a professional engineer is likely to encounter. **Rather**, codes serve as a starting point for ethical decision making. A code can also express the commitment to ethical conduct shared by members of a profession. It is important to note that ethical codes do not establish new ethical principles. They simply reiterate principles and standards that are already accepted as responsible engineering practice. A code expresses these principles in a coherent, comprehensive, and accessible manner. **Finally**, a code defines the roles and responsibilities of professionals.

It is important also to look at what a code of ethics is not. It is not a recipe for ethical behavior; as previously stated, it is only a framework for arriving at good ethical choices. A code of ethics is never a substitute for sound judgment. A code of ethics is not a legal document. One can't be arrested for violating its provisions, although expulsion from the professional society might result from code violations. As



mentioned in the previous section, with the current state of engineering societies, expulsion from an engineering society generally will not result in an inability to practice engineering, so there are not necessarily any direct consequences of violating engineering ethical codes. Finally, a code of ethics doesn't create new moral or ethical principles. As described in the previous chapter, these principles are well established in society, and foundations of our ethical and moral principles go back many centuries. Rather, a code of ethics spells out the ways in which moral and ethical principles apply to professional practice. Put another way, a code helps the engineer to apply moral principles to the unique situations encountered in professional practice.

### How does a code of ethics achieve these goals?

- 1- a code of ethics helps create an environment within a profession where ethical behavior is the norm.
- 2- It also serves as a guide or reminder of how to act in specific situations.
- 3- A code of ethics can also be used to bolster an individual's position with regard to a certain activity
- 4- The code provides a little backup for an individual who is being pressured by a superior to behave unethically.
- 5- A code of ethics can also bolster the individual's position by indicating that there is a collective sense of correct behavior; there is strength in numbers.
- 6- Finally, a code of ethics can indicate to others that the profession is seriously concerned about responsible, professional conduct. A code of ethics, however, should not be used as "window dressing," an attempt by an organization to appear to be committed to ethical behavior when it really is not.



## 6.2. Objections to Codes

Although codes of ethics are widely used by many organizations, including engineering societies, there are many objections to codes of ethics, specifically as they apply to engineering practice. First, as mentioned previously, relatively few practicing engineers are members of professional societies and so don't necessarily feel compelled to abide by their codes. Many engineers who are members of professional societies are not aware of the existence of the society's code, or if they are aware of it, they have never read it. Even among engineers who know about their society's code, consultation of the code is rare. There are also objections that the engineering codes often have internal conflicts, but don't give a method for resolving the conflict. Finally, codes can be coercive: They foster ethical behavior with stick rather than with a carrot. Despite these objections, codes are in widespread use today and are generally thought to serve a useful function.

## 6.3. Codes of the Engineering Societies

Before examining professional codes in more detail, it might be instructive to look briefly at the history of the engineering codes of ethics. Professional engineering societies in the United States began to be organized in the late 19th century. As these societies matured, many of them created codes of ethics to guide practicing engineers. Early in the 20th century, these codes were mostly concerned with issues of how to conduct business. For example, many early codes had clauses forbidding advertising of services or prohibiting competitive bidding by engineers for design projects. Codes also



University of Technology  
Department of Materials Engineering  
Fourth Grade  
Dr. Zinah Alabdali  
[Zinah.Alabdali@uotechnology.edu.iq](mailto:Zinah.Alabdali@uotechnology.edu.iq)  
Second semester- Sixth Lecture

spelled out the duties that engineers had toward their employers. Relatively less emphasis than today was given to issues of service to the public and safety. This imbalance has changed greatly in recent decades as public perceptions and concerns about the safety of engineered products and devices have changed. Now, most codes emphasize commitments to safety, public health, and even environmental protection as the most important duties of the engineer.