

Integrating Ethics and Professionalism Learning Outcomes in a Project Management Course

Panel

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ABSTRACT

Integrating core topics associated with ethics and professionalism is a challenge in many foundational courses. It can be an especially tall-order to integrate them in a foundational course in Information Systems (IS) or Information Technology Project Management (ITPM) while several other foundational topics are also being introduced to students. In this paper, we provide a framework to teach ethics and professionalism by integrating current media events. Using a live mini-case called Volkswagen's Compliance and Expansion in the United States, we illustrate how three learning outcomes and eight key teaching topics pertaining to ethics can be incorporated in any IS/ITPM course in a lively manner.

Keywords: Ethics and Professionalism, Learning Outcomes, Project Management Course, Curriculum Guidelines, IT PM

INTRODUCTION

Ethical behavior among information systems (IS) professionals has long been a crucial topic in higher education (Hilton, 2012). From a project management perspective, ethical considerations impact every aspect of a project's operations, and are a critical component to the successful completion of projects. Ethics is also important to the well-being of the many stakeholders who encompass the project including the project managers and the project team, the customers, contractors, suppliers, purchasers, sponsors, government agencies, and local citizens impacted by the project. It is therefore a key issue for the Project Management Institute (PMI), which requires that all its members be aware of the basic tenets (PMI 2015) which we will introduce in the next section. Moreover, professionals acquiring the Project Management Professional (PMP) credential are required to adhere to the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct as a pre-condition to taking the exam. Other associations and accrediting bodies such as AACSB, AIS, ABET consider ethics education important. Ethics will inevitably appear in the general education learning outcomes for many programs.

From a curriculum design perspective, coverage of ethical issues in project management is often an afterthought, since the professor is under pressure to introduce essential technical topics before addressing topics pertaining to civic and global leadership. When it comes to assessing learning outcomes, however, accreditors are looking for instances in the students' education where they have the opportunity to apply ethical principles to ethical dilemmas and consider the ramification of alternative actions.

A good opportunity for addressing civic and ethical leadership learning outcomes exists in the information systems project management course. Within the context of case studies within a course, and in group term projects, students should be asked to recognize ethical issues in a variety of settings and to assess their own ethical values. Almost all term projects assigned to students provide an opportunity to consider to reflect on a variety of ethical issues.

THE CURRICULUM GUIDELINES AND THE ETHICS KNOWLEDGE MODULE

In a survey sent out by PMI in Spring of 2014 to project management faculty members all over the world, 297 faculty members ranked ethics first amongst several possible topics that could be covered in a curriculum. Subsequently, the curriculum guidelines *Task Force Committee* introduced a knowledge module called *Ethics and Professionalism* which is defined as shown below, see Task Force on PM Curricula (2015):

The ethics module covers the importance of ethical considerations in every aspect of a project's operations and emphasizes how ethics is critical to the successful completion of most projects. Ethics is important to the well-being of the many stakeholders that encompass the project including the performing organization itself, the project managers, employees, customers, suppliers, sponsors, and members of society impacted by the project's operations.

This module has three clearly identified learning outcomes (LO) which can be addressed in any course.

1. Evaluate and assess the importance of ethics and professionalism in every aspect of the project's operation, and examine the factors that influence moral conduct.
2. Given a case-study scenario involving ethical considerations, determine how a project can be executed according to the standards of the organization performing the project.
3. Analyze ethical situations and recommend best practices for ethical decision making and the concepts that must be addressed.

To educate students within the context of the learning outcomes, the following topics are recommended: the competent project manager; ethical issues and considerations in project management; ethics models and examples of ethics issues; how to navigate political and social ethical issues inside and outside the organizations; tactfully communicating values and standards to stakeholders; ethical issues involving compensation, conflicts of interest, and procurement; exploring ethical situations including whistle blowing; competing with integrity in global projects; sustainability, the new professional responsibility; green PM issues and embracing greater accountability; professional growth of the project manager and project team

TEACHING USING LIVE CASE STUDIES

Case studies are possibly the best means of exploring the above topics and ensuring that the students have achieved the learning outcomes; they provide a lively avenue to educate students to become competent project managers. A good case study will enlighten students on their responsibilities within the context of organizational pressure from stakeholders, both internal and external, to achieve certain business goals. It will also provide them the competency to both prevent and report unethical conduct. Finally, a case discussion provides a safe environment to acquire the competency to assess and manage conflicts within the context of discussing unethical situations and whistle blowing.

One approach to teaching about ethical issues is to use live cases. McWilliams (2006) describes a *live case* as something that involves a current situation where students select an on-going or current event that involves ethical violations and write a case about it. Next, students present their case and run a debate about the challenges and issues outlined in the case and the actions that could have or should have been taken.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Within the context of the panel, we will introduce a mini-live case "Volkswagen's Compliance and Expansion in the United States" and describe the issues pertaining to project management. The dynamic nature of this case - which is being played out today and possibly will continue for several more years - makes it an effective ethics education case for a foundational course in project management, and although it is fairly complex, involves a very clearly defined ethical challenge for the project manager. There is also a lot of information available about this case on the Internet which the students can research after a presentation of the mini case. A discussion of this topic will be very lively and assure us that all the three learning outcomes described in the curriculum guidelines are achieved.

A MINI-CASE: VOLKSWAGEN'S COMPLIANCE AND EXPANSION IN THE UNITED STATES

This brief case was developed by Kanabar & Halfond (unpublished). CEO Martin Winterkorn proudly boasted about Volkswagen's ambitious strategy in his 2011 speech launching a new plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Volkswagen, he proclaimed, was on the cusp of becoming the world's largest automaker – a goal he intended to achieve under his leadership. To do this, growth in the US market would be critical. He promised energy-efficient cars with high gas mileage and committed to the kind of car the American driver demanded. Volkswagen would surpass Toyota and the others by creating safe, environmentally friendly cars without compromising on fuel efficiency, affordability, or performance. While other auto

manufacturers focused on hybrids, Volkswagen would rely on its diesel design. America, he believed, was poised to provide the boost Volkswagen needed to dominate the car industry worldwide and especially in the USA. And he put himself on record promising this achievement and committing to the components to make this happen.

With about eleven million vehicles on the roads, Volkswagen's diesel market globally was already huge. But less than five percent of these cars and trucks were sold in the United States. This provided a key opportunity, Winterkorn argued, for increasing Volkswagen's presence in the US. Winterkorn's dream of world dominance came true in the summer of 2015. The boost in the US market had pushed Volkswagen into the status as the largest automaker in the world. He would only have two months to enjoy this achievement before being forced to resign in one of the biggest scandals in automotive history.

At this point, students are asked to research the scandal. It will all point to implementation of the "defeat device": software that sensed when the car was being tested and switched the engine into a reduced emissions mode. Accordingly, it required an ITPM team to code software that "turned the equipment off during regular driving, increasing emissions far above legal limits, possibly to save fuel or to improve the car's torque and acceleration" (Russell, 2016).

Discussion Questions tied to the curriculum topics for Ethics & Professionalism knowledge module are presented below:

- What would the competent project manager do when faced with the responsibility of implementing a software defeat device? What were the ethical issues within the context of project management? Would clear structured processes like stage gates, creating a charter, risk analysis, stakeholder analysis and engagement detect the ethical issues?
- How does the PM navigate political and environmental issues pertaining to this case?
- How does the PM tactfully communicate values and standards to the stakeholders? Ethical issues involving conflict of interest? Whistle blowing?

In our panel we plan to simulate the Volkswagen case study and IT project management processes – present a charter for the "VW Software Project" and go through a stage gate. We plan to narrate fictional scenarios and conversations.

Classroom student reflections on the case study are interesting. They indicate the need for some guidance on the topic of ethical behavior and leadership:

...a fair chance that the project manager or software developer would have been labeled "not a team player" and fired.

... if I were in the project manager's shoes, I am not sure how I would act. One has to have a strong and assertive character to stand up and say no to the project...

.... according to a 2014 study (Meinert 2015), 41% of American's observed unethical or illegal behavior in the workplace. It really gives me pause to think of how many other scandals out there are waiting to happen

...was the senior management guilty? Or was it the IT Project manager, or a software engineer who did not know right from wrong? I work for a company that develops computer forensics software. It's possible our primary forensic tool can trace emails or other data on their computers. Unless, of course, if they did not use digital communications at all

...the more I discussed this case with others in my group and analyzed the situation as a whole, I began to change my stance...

CONCLUSION

A *live case* scenario—such as coding of the *defeat device* provides an opportunity to study business decisions and key IT project management processes. The live case approach is exciting as it holds students accountable for their position and creates a setting that encourages students to think critically about ethics.

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