

How Project Managers Can Promote Ethical Approaches & Better Project Results

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Business ethics and corporate social responsibility are not new, but with ever-increasing public scrutiny of business practices and their impact on social and environmental welfare, these concepts have taken on profound importance in the modern business environment. No matter the industry or the size of the company, organizations today must demonstrate their commitment to doing business ethically. For construction projects, this means prioritizing ethical decision making through the entire project life cycle.

One way to ensure construction projects proceed ethically is with dedicated project management. The role of the project manager is always, in part, to help ensure project participants act legally and ethically. They do this by offering the experience and expertise needed for project participants to see the short- and long-term impacts of difficult project decisions. This leads to more-ethical projects and better long-term project outcomes.

A Tough Question

Ethics seem to vary from person to person, business to business, and culture to culture. Plus, every construction project has different circumstances. Regardless of whether ethics are subjective, disagreements about how construction project teams should act arise often. Where there are ambiguities and disputes, an experienced project management team can give owners sound advice and confidence that their project is being



steered towards an ethical outcome.

The Project Management Advantage

While ethics are nebulous at times, ethical conundrums arise in very concrete terms on almost every project. These vary in nature, scope, and consequences. Most are small and typical. Some, however, are extremely large and can be divisive. They also go beyond the scope of legality alone, which, of course, all project teams must achieve. The conundrums can involve material selection, public relations strategies, hiring practices, accounting, and reporting, to name a few. The project management advantage is rooted in experience overcoming such concrete challenges.

As project managers, what we do in ethical matters is raise questions and encourage the right kind of decision making. Based on our experience with other projects, we know where to look to make sure no ethical matter is ignored. We are also able to forecast what certain decisions will lead to. Project managers are also able to prioritize an owner's best interests with no conflicts of interest with designers or contractors, especially when they come from a pure project management firm. And ethical behavior is always in the owner's best interests.

For example, let's say a contractor's proposed staging plan for a college construction project would disrupt several campus parking spaces for several months. This would certainly be legal—these are the college's own parking spaces. It may also be cost and schedule effective, limiting material transportation costs and daily setup time. In these circumstances, a project manager may still suggest alternative, less cost- and schedule-effective staging plans to preserve student and faculty experience during construction. At the very least, a project manager experienced in campus construction will be able to recognize the complexity of such a situation and engage in a thorough cost-benefit analysis with the owner.

This example contains an important difficulty: in the short-term, ethics may seem to conflict with the all-important schedule, budget, and quality dimensions of a project. However, even when they fail the short-term tests of schedule, cost, or quality, ethical decisions benefit project outcomes in both tangible and intangible ways. At the simplest level, they avoid costly litigation where unethical decisions would otherwise lead to non-compliance with the law. Ethical decisions can also lead to increased employee satisfaction, boost profits, help set industry standards for good behavior, and, most importantly, make a difference in the world.

Making a Real Difference


In my own recent experience on projects in the Caribbean, my team and I frequently offered professional advice on matters that had ethical implications for the owner of a disaster recovery project following Hurricane Irma. The matters ranged from questions on hiring to environmental impacts and more. For example, we advised the owner and general contractor

on how to best utilize local subcontractors to fill gaps in the project scope. This helped satisfy governmental regulations, but also boosted local sentiment about the project. We pushed for securing environmental impact assessments for the surrounding coastal and marine areas, as well as protective measures for run-off, pollutants, and debris. Following completion of the project, we advised the general contractor on how leftover materials might be donated, sold at cost, or shared with local firms to aid in the island's ongoing recovery. In these circumstances, practical and strategic decisions were also ethical decisions. However, this is not always the case.

Funded by insurance, the project required our team to work alongside consultants employed in the insurers' interest. Especially in the wake of a disaster, tensions can be high, but rather than adopting an adversarial stance, we aimed to work collaboratively wherever possible. In some instances, the project and insurance teams were even able to cooperate and achieve greater cost savings for the project while meeting required specifications.

By raising questions, helping make the right decisions, and incorporating diverse interests, we helped bring about an outcome that accomplished the owner's goals, supported the local community, and protected the environment, while respecting the interests of the insurers. Through our team's professional experience with disaster recovery projects, as well as a deep cultural understanding of the region, we were able to do so while offsetting many short-term cost, schedule, and quality issues related to the project's ethical execution.

Better Approaches, Better Projects

Construction is challenging. It can be costly, lengthy, and even dangerous. In addition to these concerns, construction is almost always ethically charged. Having project management support promotes an ethical approach to construction. The benefits of an ethically executed project generally outweigh the immediate cost or schedule inconveniences that may be associated with ethical decision making, especially in the long term. Project managers can help owners identify situations with ethical consequences, understand the long-term impact of project decisions, overcome ethical ambiguities, and drive successful project delivery. 



About the Author

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