

# The ethical dimension of project management

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## Abstract

As project management evolves it is faced with all the challenges of an emerging profession with regard to education, standards of practice and certification, and ethical issues. This paper uses a model of the project managers' thinking competencies with a special emphasis on ethical thinking as a reference point to develop an approach to teaching practical ethics to project managers. It is proposed that the project management profession has now matured to the point of being willing and able to discuss and debate ethical issues, set ethical standards and guidelines and educate their members in ethics. Although ethics is a highly philosophical and complex discipline it has valuable practical methods to offer the modern project manager.

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## 1. Introduction

A new master's program in project management (MPM) within the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Iceland has three distinct, yet interrelated ways of thinking as the conceptual framework for its curriculum (Fig. 1). These are creative thinking, logical thinking and ethical thinking [1]. While the ability to think creatively and logically has long been recognized as essential to the successful project manager the ethical dimension has not yet been given much attention in the literature.

In this paper, it is proposed that knowledge of and proficiency in thinking about and debating ethical issues is just as important to the modern project manager as are the abilities to think creatively and logically when planning, executing and completing projects. In addition, it is suggested that the core skills area where creativity, logical thinking, and ethical awareness meet and interrelate is the foundation of outstanding project management abilities.

The assumption is that the modern day well educated and responsible project manager must possess the knowl-

edge and skills to be able to discern and debate ethical issues. The question raised is which teaching methods might prove useful to help incorporate the skills of ethical thinking and debating into the project manager's toolbox.

A comprehensive review of the literature is followed by an action oriented approach where project management assignments of 32 MPM students were investigated before, during and after an intensive course in ethics and leadership.

Ethics can be defined as “the systematic attempt to make sense of individual, group, organizational, professional, social, market and global moral experience in such a way as to determine the desirable, prioritized ends that are worth pursuing, the right rules and obligations that ought to govern human conduct, the virtuous intentions and character traits that deserve development in life, and to act accordingly” [2, p. 42].

This comprehensive and inclusive definition is both practical and descriptive. Project management is in itself a fairly straightforward process with few mysterious surprises. It is the context of today's projects that brings complexity into the equation. The context includes the objectives of the project, the stakeholders, the risks, the deliverables, and the effect of the project on people,

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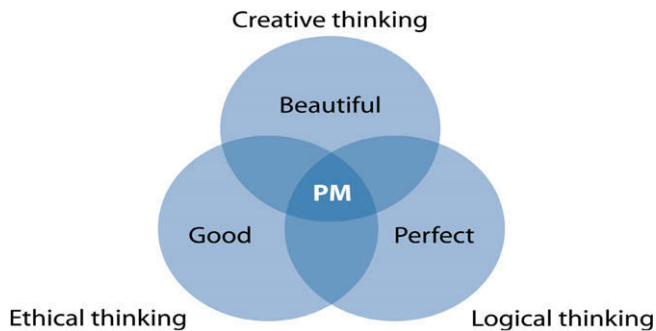


Fig. 1. The project managers' thinking competencies.

organizations, environment, politics, power, warfare, equality, freedom and prosperity.

It is suggested here that project managers should be taught to think and debate ethically and that project owners should hire project managers that along with all the important tools of project management, have the ability to explain their ethical standpoint as well as manage the ethics of a situation.

The hypothesis proposed in this paper is that teaching project managers in a very succinct manner to think about the ethics of projects will result in a marked change in the way they view project selection, purpose, risks, stakeholders, goals and outcomes.

## 2. Ethics and project management

The focus of the project management literature has traditionally been to identify and search for new and better methods for fulfilling the three primary objectives of project management; to meet specified performance within cost and on time [3]. Even though the focus remains strongly on those particular issues there is a definite evolution in terms of what is considered important for project management and which the competencies of project managers are. While earlier textbooks on project management hardly mentioned the role of leadership [4,5] newer books focus increasingly on the importance of being able to skillfully manage people and in recent years, texts have begun to broach ethical issues and considerations in the context of project management [3,6–8].

The guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) [9] does not mention ethics in relation to any competence field of project management but the American based Project Management Institute responsible for PMBoK has had a code of ethics for more than 15 years [10]. Although such codes address general professional and personal conduct in the broader context of projects, clients, project teams and the public, they do not provide a forum for addressing specific kinds of situations encountered by project managers. This is where ethics training becomes relevant.

The new IPMA Competence Baseline defines three inter-related areas of project management competencies; contextual, technical and behavioral. Ethics is one of the

behavioral competencies, although it is only very briefly and generally discussed [11]. The National Competence Baseline for Scandinavia also defines three interrelated competencies; experience applications, method applications and leadership behavior [12]. The NCB does not address ethics as such, but it does provide a self-assessment form for assessing personal integrity. The latest edition of the UK project management body of knowledge (APM BoK) focuses on ethics in project management as a concept embracing the conduct and moral principles recognised as appropriate within the project management profession [13].

Project management stands firmly with its roots in engineering. The discussion of the importance of teaching ethics is more advanced in engineering than it is in project management [14–18]. According to Xiaojin [19], one of the reasons for this may be that project management, being a much younger profession than engineering, has not quite reached the maturity to be ready to form a consensus on or formally begin debating the ethical issues specific to project management.

Some interesting attempts towards this end have actually been made in recent years. One paper argues that each project's life cycle stage demands that the project team display specific virtues (intellectual, social, emotional, moral and political) that are appropriate for the typical activities and closure documents of that particular stage (conceptual planning, process organizing, implementing/controlling, and evaluating/system improving) [20]. The model proposed in this paper presents a fresh point of view and warrants further study.

The total ethical-risk analysis method (TERA method), introduced by Nicolo [21] with special regard to multimedia, is another interesting approach that seeks to quantify the ethical risks inherent in such projects by taking into account sources of ethical risks for project users, potential harms to them, negative feedbacks from users and subsequent risks for project development.

Gorman et al. [22] described an engineering graduate option in Systems Engineering that was designed to overcome some of the specialization issues by building a link between ethical and technical training. The students produced case studies that emphasize ethical issues in the design process. The authors highly recommend this approach to integrating ethics and engineering and thereby fulfilling engineering's goal to make the world a better place.

Loo [23] combined the use of Reidenbach's and Robin's [24] multidimensional ethics scale developed for business ethics and the use of vignettes or ethical dilemmas to stimulate students' discussions about ethical issues in project management. The ethics scale taps into five major normative theories of ethics (justice, relativist, egoism, utilitarianism and deontology) thus making the basic point that there is no single "right" approach to ethical decision making. Loo [25] recommends that trainers and managers consider the use of brief vignettes to promote ethical awareness and ethical decision making skills, and that additional vignettes should be developed.

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