

Living the Code of conduct - The essence of being a professional

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What is a Code of conduct

A code of professional conduct is a necessary component to any profession to maintain standards for the individuals within that profession to adhere. It brings about accountability, responsibility and trust to the individuals that the profession serves. Code of conduct is adopted to assist members in understanding the difference between right and wrong and in applying that understanding to their decisions. Code of conduct refers to the principles, values, Standards or rules of behaviour that guide the decisions, procedures and systems of a profession in a way that contributes to the welfare of its key stakeholders and respects the rights of all constituents affected by its operations. The code of conduct describes the expectations that we have of ourselves and our stakeholders. Code of conduct consists of all the obligations that professionals must respect while carrying out their duties. It includes core values of the profession and the behaviour which should be adopted. People who breach their code of conduct incur disciplinary actions that can range from a warning or reprimand to dismissal or expulsion from their professional order.

The Code of Conduct outlines specific behaviours that are required or prohibited. Codes of conduct are written to guide behaviour. It is probably quite obvious that codes of conduct are not made for circumstances where it is easy to do what is right, but rather for when immediate factors might otherwise render the proper move unclear or obscured by ideas of expediency. Codes of conduct are made to guide us towards consistently proper or ethical choices so that we habitually avoid difficult and ambiguous situations. However, We have to accept that despite rules, constraints, training, or promises, human beings act in accordance with their morality.

Professional codes of conduct draw on professional ethical principles viz. honesty, trustworthiness, loyalty, respect for others, adherence to the law, doing good and avoiding harm to others, accountability, as the basis for prescribing required standards of behaviour for members of a profession. They also seek to set out the expectations that the profession and society have of its members

Most professionals have internally enforced codes of conduct that members of the profession must follow to preserve the integrity of the profession. This is not only for the benefit of the client but also for the benefit of those belonging to that profession. Disciplinary codes allow the profession to define a standard of conduct and professional responsibility and ensure that individual practitioners meet this standard, by disciplining them through a professional body if they do not practice accordingly. It also maintains the public's trust in the profession, encouraging the public to continue seeking their services.

Who is a professional

A person, who is a member of a professional body due to the education qualification and follows the prescribed model and professional code of conduct. A person who has mastered a high level of expertise in a subject or field. A person who is formally certified by a professional body or belonging to a specific profession by virtue of having completed a required course of studies and/or practice and whose competence can usually be measured against an established set of standards. A professional is a member of a profession or any person who earns their living from a specified professional activity. The term also describes the standards of education and training that prepare members of the profession with the particular knowledge and skills necessary to perform their specific role within that profession. In addition, most professionals are subject to strict codes of conduct, enshrining rigorous ethical and moral obligations

Purpose of the Code of conduct

The intention of codes of conduct is to provide guidelines for the minimum standard of appropriate behaviour in a professional context. Codes of conduct sit alongside the general law of the land and the personal values of members of the profession. The primary value of a professional code of conduct is not as a checklist for disciplining non-conforming members, although breaches of a code of conduct usually do carry a professional disciplinary consequence. Rather, its primary value is to act as a prompt sheet for the promotion of ethical decision-making by members of that profession.

Benefits of the Code of conduct

Professional codes of conduct provide benefits to:

- the public, as they build confidence in the profession's trustworthiness
- clients, as they provide greater transparency and certainty about how their affairs will be handled
- members of the profession, as they provide a supporting framework for resisting pressure to act inappropriately, and for making acceptable decisions in what may be 'grey areas'
- the profession as a whole, as they provide a common understanding of acceptable practice which builds collegiality and allows for fairer disciplinary procedures
- others dealing with the profession, as the profession will be seen as more reliable and easier to deal with.

Living the Code of conduct

In order to be of use or relevant to a professional, a code of conduct requires internalization and habitual reference. Specifically, it requires a strong, consistent internal

standard; quantifiable, integrated into every element of practice, and each component related to the others. The result of this standard put into practice is known as professionalism. Professionalism means behaving in an ethical manner while assuming and fulfilling your rightful responsibilities in every situation every time, without fail. It means, in part, conducting your affairs in such a way as to garner trust and confidence in every aspect of your work. It means having the requisite ability to be worthy of the confidence others place in you.

Professionalism connotes "Professional responsibility" which implies obligations and standards in the performance of services. Characteristically, there are three elements in the concept "professional responsibility". One element concerns the effective use of that body of knowledge that the profession has developed. A second concerns the suitability of the professional's attitudes and actions in dealing with the client when viewed in terms of regard for public standards and ethics in behaviour. The third element focuses on the propriety of the professional's conduct in view of the professional's self-image. Typically, all three perspectives are commingled and may be presented as a "code of professional conduct."

A professional Code of conduct is a rational construct built upon a foundation of values. Those in the habit of moral discrimination—the practice of automatically comparing issues to their own core values and deciding and/or acting accordingly—are people of integrity. But not everyone is practiced at or has disciplined themselves to evaluate and make decisions in this manner. There are many who approach each situation afresh and evaluate based merely on immediate factors and/or emotional primacy.

Professional decisions which are compatible with the professional Code of conduct therefore require of individuals three qualities that can be identified and developed. The first is competence to recognize issues and to think through the consequences of alternative resolutions. The second is self-confidence to seek out different points of view and then to decide what is right at a given time and place, in a particular set of relationships and circumstances. The third is what William James called tough-mindedness, which is the willingness to make decisions when all that needs to be known cannot be known and when the questions that press for answers have no established and incontrovertible solutions. At times, under pressures to get ahead, the professional (of whose native integrity we are hopeful) is tempted to pursue advancement at the expense of others, to cut corners, to seek to win at all cost, to make things seem better than they are. We often make small ethical compromises for "good" reasons. Minor ethical lapses can seem harmless, but they instill in us a hard-to-break habit of distorted thinking. Rationalizations drown out our inner voice, and we make up the rules as we go. We lose control of our decisions, fall victim to the temptations and pressures of our situations, taint our characters, and sour business and personal relationships. The professional practice requires a prolonged play of judgment. Professionals must find in their own will, experience, and intelligence the principles and practice of conduct they apply in balancing conflicting claims.

Code of conduct in practice is only as strong as the individual's moral base. When one's core morality is based on relativism, any ethical constraints become impotent because then any behavior or practice can be justified according to its relative value and appropriateness. As should be obvious, such behavior contradicts ethical constraint. It is probably quite obvious that rules and codes of conduct are not made for circumstances where it is easy to do what is right, but rather for when immediate factors might otherwise render the proper move unclear or obscured by ideas of expediency. More to the point, codes of conduct are made to guide us toward consistently proper or ethical choices so that we habitually avoid difficult and ambiguous situations. However, despite rules, constraints, training, or promises, human beings can only be trusted to act in accordance with their morality. Since a professional must unfailingly adhere to the rules of professional ethics, perhaps you can perceive the potential for problems presented by any allowance for relativism.

Living the Code of conduct - live examples

I was invited to deliver a lecture on the occasion of the founders day of a company. I decide to talk on Code of Conduct. I raised a question - is there a Code of conduct in the company? many hands went up (though not all), then I asked have you read it? fewer hands were up now, I then asked - have you understood it, still fewer hands went up. Finally I asked - do you live by it? only two hands went up in a gathering of about 350 people. It is good thing for a company to have a code of conduct, but more importantly people must also live by it.

I was a speaker at one of the seminars at Chennai organized by the Institute of Cost Accountants of India. Sitting on the dais along side was a senior professional lady from a company based in Noida. As is customary after the presentations by the speakers a memento was offered to all the dignitaries sitting on the dais. When the gift packed memento was handed over to this lady she whispered in my ears "what is the cost of this?" I was surprised, I said 'Madam why are you bothered..this is just a token of appreciation for your having come all the way to participate as a speaker at the seminar' she said 'No, Dr.Gupta my company has a gift policy. If whatever is there inside the box exceeds that threshold amount then sorry I would not be able to accept it' I was startled. Here was a lady who was living the code of conduct of the company in true sense.

Conclusion

In order to be of use or relevant to a professional, a Code of conduct requires internalization and habitual reference. Specifically, it requires a strong, consistent internal standard; integrated into every element and various dimensions of practice. A professional needs to live the Code of conduct and manifest the same in all his professional actions, duties and responsibilities. A professional code of conduct articulates both expected and unacceptable standards of behaviour. However, a code without discipline lacks substance and impact. Desirable behaviour results from training, ensuring professionals comprehend the code through written acknowledgements and reinforcing the standards in practice every day. ■