



A Societal Imperative

Expanding business ethics on a universal scale

BY BRAD YARBROUGH

Whether we are talking about games, sports or business, it is crucial that the rules be defined clearly and consistently. In regard to ethics in the right of way profession, this is especially important. And not just in the United States, but around the world.

While serving on IRWA's International Ethics Committee, James Finnegan, SR/WA wrote the inaugural article about the Association's commitment to promoting ethical conduct. It was titled, "Ethics and the Right of Way Professional" and ran in the November/December 1996 issue of Right of Way Magazine. In it he wrote, "Ethics, which can mean different things to different people, are based on a Universal Standard."

That standard has not always been easy to identify. While some believe that building a strong ethical corporate culture is critical to success, others do not. In fact, some countries have an imbedded "shadow economy" where it's normal to pay bribes in order to successfully complete a business transaction.

How can an entity with a commitment to ethical standards conduct business with those having dissimilar rules of business or in a country with conflicting ethical values? The dilemma became obvious when a U.S.-based energy company entered into a joint venture with a foreign country to build a natural gas pipeline. That country harnessed its military to secure the right of way and relocate affected villages. It also

forced the inhabitants to clear the land and build the roads necessary to complete the project. Does the U.S. company bear the responsibility for the human rights violations of its partner?

A Culture of Respect

With increased emphasis on business ethics, take note of the recent Ethics and Compliance Training Survey conducted by NAVEX Global. Among respondents, the number one priority was "creating a culture of ethics and respect." Yet, building a healthy culture requires establishing objectives that are consistent with matured perspectives.

There is widespread agreement that ethical behaviors must be built upon three pillars—people, planet and profits. Profits can no longer trump the need to prioritize people or the planet—whether producing oil in the Gulf of Mexico or placing cell towers in emerging markets. As corporations and countries develop more transportation, utilities and natural resources, the focus on ethical, responsible conduct will be required. It's clear that the Universal Standard must respect the three pillars.

Business Strategy Review published an article titled, "Managing Ethically in Corrupt Environments." The author, John Mullins writes, "...the rules for doing business are not always the same in less developed countries." It further claims, "...if today's business leaders want to leave a better legacy to their children and grandchildren, it's the only way to do business." But, it's the following statement that provides ample reason to contemplate this issue: "Thus, managing ethically is no longer just a business imperative; it's a societal imperative, too, if we'd like our children to live and work in a more ethical world."

In the January/February 2015 issue of Right of Way Magazine, Eric Finn, Esq., wrote about the International Ethics Standards Coalition. To bring consistency to a global audience, a distinguished group of worldwide associations—including IRWA—was assembled to align fundamental ethics principles. Eric wrote, "Having an internationally recognized set of ethics standards will strengthen the industry and lend credence to the hard work of property-related professionals across the globe." I commend our Association for taking a leadership role in this initiative.

When Jim Finnegan wrote about ethics meaning different things to different people, he said it was based on a Universal Standard. In defining that standard, he wrote, "Let's go back to the Golden Rule. It is part of the Association's Code of Ethics." The Golden Rule is a simple principle of reciprocity—treating others like you would like to be treated. This continues to be a wise perspective that should rightfully serve as an anchoring point for the ongoing discussion of global ethics. ✪



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