

Defining **UNETHICAL** **BEHAVIOR**

The dangers of misusing the term

I've been writing the Ethics column for three years with the goal of contributing to the IRWA's emphasis on promoting and establishing high ethical standards in our profession. However, there is a danger of mislabeling all offensive conduct as "unethical." Just as the term "ethics" must retain a sharply focused, distinctive meaning, so too must the word "unethical."

This concern isn't new. Jeffrey Seglin, a distinguished writer and lecturer associated with the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, expressed similar reservations in an article titled, "The Right Thing; Bad Behavior Can Be Perfectly Ethical." He points out that "painting every kind of bad behavior as a lapse in ethics cheapens a term that should be reserved for discussions of core moral values and their implications."

BY BRAD YARBROUGH



Defining Our Actions

What are some distinctions that should be drawn regarding offensive behavior? Though there is some overlap in their meaning, here is a list of words intended to provide a contrast in describing wrong actions:

ILL-MANNERED

This describes actions (or persons) that are impolite, vulgar, ungracious, discourteous, rude and selfish. The list of poor workplace manners includes taking items from a coworker's desk without permission, clipping your nails at your desk, making a mess in the employee's bathroom and many more.

ILL-TEMPERED

This describes those who are easily annoyed or made angry, irritable, moody, grumpy or sulky.

IMPROPER/INAPPROPRIATE

Though a very general term, this is most often used to describe actions (or persons) in violation of accepted rules, policies and standards of conduct. For instance, the "improper" action of an employee when violating company policy.

IMMORAL

This describes actions (or persons) that demonstrate behavior outside the acceptable norms and expectations of society or religion. Moral standards are not restricted to sexual behavior but applies to all actions that impact societal relationships.

ILLEGAL

This describes actions which are in violation of a law.

Being ill-mannered or ill-tempered is rarely an ethical issue. Seglin states, "Ethical doesn't always equal nice, either. People can treat you rudely, veil their motives from you, shock you, inconvenience you or drive you nuts with their pigheaded intransigence

without clocking up any automatic debits on the ethics register."

On the other hand, it is almost always unethical to act immorally or illegally. And certainly when a company's ethics policy is violated.

The Bigger Picture

Although some offensive behavior is not necessarily unethical and may even be an unintentional mistake, wrong actions can point to one's internal commitment to doing the right thing. After all, there is a direct link between character and conduct. Character is crafted through a lifetime of training, education and experience. It's important to get it right because the reputation of our industry is dependent on the aggregate character of its people. While championing professional growth of its members, the IRWA encourages personal excellence as integral to its focus on ethics. ✪

It's my hope that future articles will address specific ethical challenges faced by IRWA members. Please share real-life examples of ethical dilemmas you have encountered in your career to brad@pilgrimland.com or (405) 210-1530. These stories will be kept confidential and will be valuable in guiding others when facing similar situations.



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