

THE RIGHT KIND OF CHANGE

Ethical behavior within our Association

BY BRAD YARBROUGH



Actor and author Will Rogers once said, "If you don't like the weather in Oklahoma, wait a minute and it'll change." Those of us who live in the Sooner state laughingly agree at just how quickly it does. After all, change is inevitable. But what about the business climate of our industry? Has it experienced noticeable changes as well? Of course it has.

A Look Back

We live in an age of incredible advancements which have been fascinating to observe and participate in. Improvements in transportation, the explosion of personal computing access, the increasing availability of information through the internet and other technological developments are dramatically changing society.

Progress is fast-paced and as a result, it is rearranging the public's wants and wishes. Businesses are eager to meet new consumer needs with innovative products and services, but what about the ethical issues in the midst of such change? Are our ethics also consumer driven? Maya Angelou, a notable author and community activist, apparently thinks so. She wrote, "The needs of society determine its ethics."

History reveals this to be true. Just take a look back to agrarian society where it was acceptable to use slave labor to achieve economic gains or in the dawn of the industrial revolution, where children were frequently used to reduce labor costs. While these practices are certainly unethical to us, they were not often challenged during their time. Instead, these practices were viewed as necessary for the “needs” of local culture. Thankfully, we continue to develop, evolve and improve as a society. As we do so, we must actively work to ensure our ethics align with our development.

The Evolution of Our Industry

Ethics considers how people relate to one another. In business, this includes employees, consumers, suppliers and the community. Our industry has experienced transformations which by necessity have been accompanied by a change in ethical viewpoints. It’s important to highlight a few of the more obvious changes in our profession.

Perhaps the most significant is the evolution from being an industry dominated by men to a much more inclusive one that has recognized the

equal contributions of women. In addition, it is common for women to be both business owners and corporate executives.

Additionally, there’s been a noticeable change in how employers handle employees. Ethical considerations increasingly influence the issues of hiring, firing, lay-offs, training, compensation and employee benefits. Today’s businesses routinely define company values, policies and ethics standards, and manage accordingly. Respect for the dignity of employees as people is increasingly evident compared to their treatment as “units of labor” in decades past.

This ethical high ground is noticeable in the health and safety programs which have become a high priority within our industry. While companies benefit from a decrease in the high costs associated with accidents, the motivation for this focus is not merely economic. It seems to be based in a sincere concern for the employee’s welfare.

Profitability is critical, but making money unethically is widely condemned in today’s industry. Nowhere is this more evident than in negotiating landowner agreements. Companies commonly recognize that “the end does not justify the means.” Right of way professionals generally believe that it is ethically sound to disclose what a “reasonable” person would want to know and to provide

landowners with all information that is “relevant” to the decision being made. Ethical companies astutely understand the short and long term negative consequences of deceitful manipulation.

Concern for the environment is an issue which demonstrates the evolution of business ethics. Caring for the planet has become a moral issue. Twentieth century French writer Saint Exupery said, “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our descendants.” This view underpins our industry’s increasing commitment to protect the environment.

Continuous Improvement

I’m not convinced that the definition of right and wrong ought to evolve according to the current needs of a changing society. Perhaps it is unrealistic and utopian to think that ethics should be anchored in an unchanging, universal code. Nonetheless, as an Association, let’s celebrate changes that demonstrate our desire to do things right and to treat people right. And let’s support the IRWA as it champions ethical behavior within our industry and among our membership. 🌟



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Brad Yarbrough is the Owner and CEO of Pilgrim Land Services, a right of way services company in Oklahoma City. With over 35 years experience in oil and gas, he has clients nationwide and an extensive network of landmen and agents.