



THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS EDUCATION IN SAFETY

Ethics education in safety is essential because it helps prepare occupational environmental, health and safety (EHS) professionals to recognize and navigate complex moral dilemmas when the right course of action is not always clear, says Jan Wachter, Sc.D., CSP, CIH, an adjunct professor in the Department of Human Factors, Safety and Social Sciences at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

In a webinar (ASSP, 2023), Wachter compares the field of ethics with morality, law and science, and explores the need to educate students in EHS and similar fields on the roles of ethics in safety.

What Is Ethics?

“When it comes to EHS professionals, ethics is really about ascertaining what are good and bad actions and behaviors in the workplace,” says Wachter. Because EHS professionals make decisions in the workplace that have consequences for the organization and employees, they are considered moral agents. Because moral agents act with reference to right and wrong, they can be held accountable for their judgments, according to Wachter.

Why Educate Students on Ethics?

The need for ethics instruction is rooted in not only ABET accreditation standards, which require students to understand ethical responsibilities, but also real-world issues. Wachter says that early-career professionals and students returning from internships often report facing pressure to manipulate safety data or make decisions driven solely by cost-benefit analyses—issues that raise serious ethical concerns. While these instances may not occur daily, he says they happen often enough to demand ethical awareness.

How Organizational Culture Can Shape Decisions

Several factors in an organization can complicate ethical decision-making. According to Wachter, safety professionals are often expected to serve as “workplace parents” and “police officers,” roles that can generate friction with employees and management. Interactions with executives typically occur during times of crisis or when something has gone wrong, making their efforts to drive change susceptible to being interpreted as personal criticism.

Although this dynamic does not occur in every instance, it happens often enough to contribute to a broader perception of negativity toward the EHS professional. In response to this negativity, some safety professionals may prioritize self-preservation and self-promotion over a

clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the organization.

Using Ethical Frameworks

Ethical actions should be guided by reasoning rather than by emotions or convenience. Wachter cautions against falling into common traps such as confirmation bias, obedience to authority or justifying actions to serve self-interests. Instead, EHS professionals should think critically and intentionally based on well-established ethical frameworks.

These ethical approaches include deontology (duty-based decision-making), consequentialism (focus on outcomes), virtue ethics (character-based reasoning), teleology (intent-driven reasoning) and rights ethics (protecting individual rights). Teaching these models equips professionals to assess complicated dilemmas from multiple perspectives.

“The more personal risk professionals perceive in carrying out their duties, the more challenging it becomes to act ethically—even when the right course of action is apparent,” says Wachter.

Ethical Burden In EHS

“When an EHS professional knowingly chooses not to do the right thing—despite having the power to act—that’s a failure of moral courage,” says Wachter. This often stems from influences such as professional or financial gain (greed), or fear of consequences such as losing their job, contracts or social acceptance within the organization. These pressures can lead to poor ethical decisions in the field, and it is important to prepare EHS professionals new to the field for this reality, he says.

Some professionals may encounter situations where they want to do the right thing but cannot. This is usually due to organizational constraints outside their control such as cost limitations, cultural norms or a value system that does not align with their own. While EHS professionals may aim for continuous improvement or strive for excellence, those efforts are often hindered by resource managers or decision-makers who may not prioritize the same goals. This creates a tension between ethical ideals and operational realities.

What Is “Reasonably Practical”?

EHS professionals are responsible for protecting workers by ensuring that safety

measures are implemented so far as is reasonably practicable, which involves exercising reasonable care. Reasonably practicable comes down to assessing risk and balancing competing priorities, especially when control costs may be extremely high and outcomes are uncertain.

Professional EHS ethics go beyond compliance; they encourage high standards of integrity, expertise and a commitment to making a meaningful impact. As moral agents, EHS professionals are expected to act intentionally and can be held accountable for outcomes of actions they should have been aware of, according to Wachter.

Ethics vs. Morality

Morality refers to values that are generally subscribed to and fostered by society; essentially, it is basic beliefs about right and wrong. Conversely, ethics are how we apply those moral values in real-world situations. It involves reasoning through specific contexts to determine the most appropriate actions and behaviors.

“While morality paints in broad strokes, ethics requires narrow brush strokes in nuanced colors,” Wachter says. “In essence, ethics is the practice of morality in action. It helps us navigate complex decisions when the right choice isn’t obvious.”

Ensuring Accountability & Trust

Overall, Wachter says ethics education helps EHS professionals build skills necessary to make thoughtful, responsible decisions that prioritize safety and well-being, even when under pressure. By understanding ethical principles, safety professionals are better equipped to act with integrity, hold themselves accountable and maintain trust with the workers and organizations they serve. **PSJ**

References

ASSP. (2023, March 28). Ethics for safety and health professionals. <https://vimeo.com/812492398>

Cite this article

ASSP. (2025, July). The importance of ethics education in safety. *Professional Safety*, 70(7), 38.