

APPLYING ETHICS TO SAFETY PRACTICE

By Justin Molocznik

Imagine the following scenario: It is after 4:30 p.m. on Friday afternoon and everyone at your workplace is ready to leave for a much-deserved weekend. As you start to pack your things to head home, you get a call from your boss.

A last-minute request has come in for a task, and the crew is mobilized and ready to go. However, there is a problem: the workers need to access a confined space area but do not have a permit or a way to monitor the air in the space. The fix should take less than 2 minutes to complete, and the crew has worked on and off in this area for the past several weeks with no issues related to compromised environment or with the space in general (e.g., egress, access). The crew is standing by, waiting for you to give the go-ahead for them to forego the permit and air monitoring. It seems that everyone wants to just get the work done quickly so the weekend can begin. Your boss and the crew all agree that the risk is low and do not think it is necessary to go through “all the trouble” of properly setting up the confined space. In fact, many crew members believe that there is no risk at all and that designating this area as a confined space is excessive.

As a safety professional, you think about what you know is right—setting up the confined space and following

company procedure—which is in contrast with most of the crew’s desire to simply allow them to get the work done quickly. You feel pressure to just let the work happen, even though you know that this decision goes against company rules and regulations as well as your personal beliefs. What you are facing is an ethical dilemma, one that many safety professionals experience in their careers. What do you do?

The choice in this scenario seems straightforward, but it might not feel that way in the moment. Factors such as individual experience and education may also play a role in how difficult such a decision may be, and, taking all this into account, it can be easy to understand why a professional may choose to forego the confined space procedure. Certainly, the dilemma described in this article should not manifest if company culture dictates to always follow procedures or if the boss in this scenario fully understands their role in implementing safety. But similar situations happen to safety professionals often, and one’s resolve to stand by their moral and professional code of conduct—their ethics—is tested over the course of their career.

A great deal of philosophical ideologies, arguments and thought exercises exist when it comes to ethics. The well-known trolley problem, for example, poses a scenario with a runaway trolley headed toward five people. The only way to save them is to switch the trolley to another track, causing it to kill one person. While the situation is somewhat sensationalized, this thought experiment creates an environment to reflect on a decision made where a clear right or wrong answer may not exist. Often, there are times in the application of ethics where decisions are not clear. Hopefully, a safety professional will not have to face such dire circumstances as those in the trolley problem; however, a safety professional does face many situations with conflicts of interest, or where personal interests or relationships are tested or compromised by professional judgment or duties. Safety professionals within organizations

often face such circumstances when their “duty of loyalty” is tested in some form or fashion, such as favoring production over safety. This type of ethical issue tests a safety professional’s pre-disposition to refer to the regulations and rules and challenges them with the potential outcomes or consequences of a decision to maximize the overall well-being of those involved (McCombs School of Business, n.d.).

Ethics can be a complicated issue, which is one reason why it is included in the process of maintaining certifications such as BCSP’s CSP certification. ASSP members have access to a robust network of individuals who can help navigate the application of ethics in the occupational environmental, health and safety (EHS) profession. Work from Dan Snyder, Ed.D., CSP, CHST, OHST, CIT, and Wyatt Bradbury, M.Eng., CSP, CHST, CIT, is an excellent place to start; both have extensive backgrounds and knowledge, and offer thoughtful interpretations of ethics. In an ASSP (2023) interview, Snyder clarified the difference between ethics and morality:

A lot of people interchange the words “morality” and “ethics,” and for all practical purposes, we’re talking about the same thing. Morality deals in philosophy and making choices with reason. The whole idea is looking at the choices we make and the reasons we make those choices. In safety, we have a fairly well-established code of conduct that’s enforceable in our profession. We hold ourselves accountable in that way. But ethics is framed within the context of occupational realities. Your company, area of the world, products—all of those contexts come into how you will apply your trade ethically with the people you serve.

Snyder explains that codes, regulations and theories are easily imagined as applicable, but when applied in the context of occupational realities, the circumstances

ETHICS PRACTICES FOR EHS PROFESSIONALS

- **Recognize ethical dilemmas early.** Identify situations where safety rules conflict with production pressures or workplace culture.
- **Align personal and organizational ethics.** Provide input on your organization’s code of ethics to ensure that it harmonizes with professional standards.
- **Seek informed compromise when possible.** When no clear right or wrong exists, find a middle way that upholds safety values while meeting operational needs.
- **Uphold core professional principles.** Maintain integrity, comply with laws, foster respect and commit to continuous learning.
- **Build confidence in your ethical stance.** Know your values and be prepared to stand by them when tested in real-world scenarios.



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may dictate a different response (ASSP, 2023). Like many human and organizational performance practitioners, safety professionals understand that there is a difference between work as imagined or designed versus work as done. The same goes for ethics as imagined versus ethics as applied. Even in dealing with something as abstract as ethical ideologies, it becomes more complicated when these concepts are applied to real-time decisions and scenarios in the workplace.

How do we apply ethics in occupational EHS? In an interview with ASSP (2024), Bradbury summarizes the application of ethics as that of personal professional ethics to an organization's code of ethics:

Because an organization's code of ethics encompasses the many different professionals who work for [the organization], the code [of ethics] may not adhere exactly to the safety professional's code of ethics. The best way to ensure your professional ethics harmonize with your organization's ethics is to provide input into the code.

Bradbury explains that when a conflict or impasse occurs, the safety professional must find a compromise or "creative middle way" (ASSP, 2024). Taking a step back with the real-world application of ethics, more times than not we will land at compromise. If there is no clear right or wrong answer, as is often the case, safety practitioners are left to make a decision that aligns with their professional ethics but still satisfies the demands of the situation.

For those new to the profession, or those who need a refresher, ASSP's Code of Professional Conduct states that a safety professional's conduct is based upon the following fundamental principles (n.d.):

- Maintain the highest standards of integrity and professional conduct, and comply with all applicable laws, regulations, policies, and ethical standards.
- Create a safe, resilient, and sustainable workplace for all workers, while anticipating their future needs.
- Treat all persons with respect, dignity, and fairness, in a manner that fosters equitable participation without regard to personal identity.
- Commit to life-long learning and continuous improvement of knowledge and skills.

Ethics can be confusing and ambiguous, especially when applied to the conditions of the workplace. It is important to know one's fundamental morals and values as applied to professional conduct and workplace, and to be confident when they are tested. There are plenty of opportunities for compromise, but as long as safety professionals maintain these fundamental values, they will always have justification for their decision-making and conduct. **PSJ**

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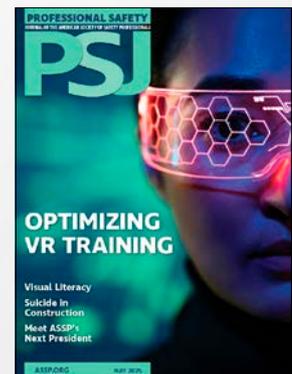
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