

Navigating the Ethics Maze: Do the Project Managers Need a Moral Compass?

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In today's "post-truth" era, trust is a scarce commodity. Project managers, like all professionals, operate on the foundation of trust. They oversee projects that can impact livelihoods, communities, and more than ever entire societies. Building and maintaining trust requires unwavering ethical conduct.

This article explores the critical role of ethics in project management, the benefits it brings, and the consequences for its absence. And how professional organizations are promoting ethical behavior among their members and the wider project community.

Imagine a project manager forced to choose between cutting corners for a quick win or upholding ethical standards, potentially sacrificing deadlines or budgets. Ethical dilemmas like these are more common than you might think.

As a project practitioner, either working within an organization, or operating independently, here's why ethical project management matters:

Trust and Reputation: Trust is the bedrock of successful project management. Clients, suppliers, colleagues, and stakeholders all need to believe in the integrity of the project manager. An ethical reputation attracts better talent, fosters stronger relationships, and ultimately leads to better project outcomes.

Enhanced Performance: Ethical behavior improves morale and employee loyalty. Conversely, unethical practices breed distrust and resentment. A happy, motivated team delivers better results.

Long-Term Success: Ethical companies outperform their peers financially in the long run. Ethical behavior builds trust, which translates to loyal customers and a sustainable business model.

Ethical dilemmas can arise in various forms. We have identified some common challenges below:

Pressure to Deliver: Meeting unrealistic deadlines or exceeding budgets might tempt a project manager to cut corners or misrepresent facts.

Conflicts of Interest: Sometimes, personal interests or loyalties can clash with professional obligations.

Transparency and Honesty: Withholding information or sugarcoating facts can lead to mistrust and project failures.

Where ever they sit within an organization, Project managers play a pivotal role in fostering an ethical project environment. They must demonstrate “ethical sensitivity,” meaning they can identify ethical issues and act with fairness, integrity, and transparency. This leadership sets the tone for the entire project.

Professional bodies like the Association for Project Management (APM) based out of the UK and the Project Management Institute (PMI), the leading international project association, play a crucial role in promoting ethical behavior within the field.

These organizations offer both their members and the wider project community support in numerous ways:

Provide an agreed upon Code of Ethics: These codes provide clear guidelines for ethical conduct, helping project managers navigate complex situations.

Deliver Training and Resources: Professional bodies offer training programs and resources on ethical decision-making and conflict resolution.

Implement Advocacy: These organizations advocate for ethical practices within the industry, holding members accountable and raising awareness of ethical challenges.

It is not difficult to identify the situation where organizations have fallen short, and expected ethics have been absent. The headlines are filled with examples of companies facing ethical scandals – from the Volkswagen emissions crisis to the Wells Fargo account fraud. These events highlight the devastating impact of unethical behavior on reputation, finances, and stakeholder trust.

Building a strong ethical foundation takes time and effort. And as we have seen from the examples above can be destroyed in a matter of moments. And while smart organizations will have guard-rails, processes and policies in place to support ethical behavior, all too often the final decision will lie with the professional.

So what are the steps that project managers can take to prevent them from acting unethically. Here are some basic measures that project practitioners at any level can take:

- Be familiar with codes of ethics, specifically those enshrined by your organization.

- Recognize and avoid conflicts of interest. Recognising that these may not always be obvious.
- Maintain transparency and communicate openly. Always consider the audit trail and assume that as the project manager the buck will stop with you.
- Speak up when you see unethical behavior. It is your job to stay vigilant on your project and call out anything that looks incorrect or untoward.
- Lead by example and champion ethical conduct. Be clear from the outset how you intend to manage your project and set the standard for ethical behavior for your team.

In an increasingly interconnected world, ethical project management is not just good practice, it's essential for success. By prioritizing ethical behavior, project managers contribute not only to project success but to building trust and creating a sustainable business environment.

Professional organizations and individual commitment are key drivers in achieving this goal.

For more information on achieving ethical standards on your project, you can review the following resources: [How project managers can build trust with clients \(LEFF, 2022\)](#), [Ethical Reputation Blueprint: Building Trust in an Age of Skepticism \(Reputationsciences, 2023\)](#), [Project Management Ethics: Importance of Integrity and Accountability \(IPM, 2024\)](#) [Trust: The Cornerstone of Successful Project Management \(PMI, 2023\)](#) [Ethics in project management \(APM, 2024\)](#)



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