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Ethics and Integrity in Engineering Consultancy

Engineering consultancy is a profession founded on trust. Clients entrust consultants with decisions involving large investments, public safety & security, robustness, environmental impact, and societal consequences so that they are built fit for the purpose intended and for their design service life albeit with regular maintenance. Bridges, power plants, cement factories, and other industrial facilities, as well as water systems, etc., designed by Consultants shape and influence the quality of human life. In such a context, apart from technical competence, what distinguishes a true professional organisation from a mere service provider are its commitments to ethics and integrity.

Ethics provides the framework of what is right and acceptable behaviour, while integrity ensures consistent adherence to those ethical principles even under pressure. In engineering consultancy, where commercial interests, competitive pressures, and other influences often come in conflict with professional judgment, ethics and integrity act as the moral compass.

Definitions of Ethics and Integrity

1 Ethics

Ethics refers to a set of moral principles or values that govern conduct. In a professional context, ethics defines what is considered fair and acceptable behaviour within a particular profession.

For engineering consultants, ethics involves:

- Acting in the best interest of society and the client
- Ensuring safety, quality, and sustainability
- Maintaining honesty in reporting and advice
- Avoiding conflicts of interest
- Respecting confidentiality, and
- Rejecting bribery, favouritism, and misrepresentation.

Professional bodies worldwide codify these principles into codes of ethics, providing guidance to professional conduct.

“Codes of ethics are not paperwork –they are safety systems for society”

2. Integrity

Integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles consistently in action. While ethics tells one what is right, integrity establishes whether one actually does it.

Integrity means:

- Doing the right thing even when it is difficult or costly
- Standing by professional judgment despite pressure

- Being truthful in communication and documentation
- Aligning actions with declared values, and
- Maintaining consistency between words and deeds.

In simple terms, ethics is the rulebook; integrity is the discipline to follow it.

“Without Integrity, skill becomes a liability”

Connection between Ethics and Integrity

Ethics and integrity are inseparable. Ethics without integrity becomes theoretical and hollow; integrity without ethics lacks direction. Ethics defines standards of right and wrong. Integrity ensures adherence to those standards in practice.

In engineering consultancy:

An ethical code may prohibit falsifying reports. Integrity ensures the engineer refuses to alter data even if the management or the clients demand it. Thus, ethics provides the moral map, while integrity is the moral engine that keeps the organisation moving along the right route on that map. Or in simple terms, ‘**Ethics = Rule Book**’ and ‘**Integrity = Inner compass**’. Together, they build credibility, trust, and professional honour.

Basic Tenets of Ethics and Integrity in Engineering Consultancy

The following core principles form the backbone of ethical engineering consultancy:

1 Responsibility to Society

Public safety, health, and welfare are paramount. Designs and recommendations must never compromise safety, security and robustness for cost or speed.

2 Competence

Continuous professional development is an ethical obligation. Accept only work within one’s domain of expertise.

3 Honesty and Truthfulness

Drawings, cost estimates, and performance data and reports must reflect reality.

4 Independence and Objectivity

Advice must be technically sound, unbiased and free from hidden financial or other influences.

5 Fairness and Impartiality

Treat clients, employees, suppliers, and competitors fairly. Avoid discrimination and favouritism.

6 Confidentiality

Protect client information except when disclosure is required by law or public safety concerns.

7 Transparency

Decisions, pricing and contractual arrangements should be open and justifiable.

8 Accountability

Accept responsibility for decisions and outcomes rather than shifting blame.

9 Respect for Environment

Design and advise with due consideration to environmental protection and sustainability.

10 Respect for the Profession

Avoid conduct that discredits the profession, such as bribery, plagiarism, or misrepresentation of credentials.

How can an Engineering Consultancy Company be Judged Ethical or Unethical?

Ethical judgment rests on consistent patterns of action, not isolated incidents. An organisation’s ethical character is revealed not by slogans but by behaviour.

1 Some Indicators of an Ethical Organisation:

- Has a written and enforced code of ethics
- Refuses unsafe or technically unsound projects
- Provides honest opinions even if unwelcome
- Encourages whistle-blowing without fear
- Pays fair wages and respects labour laws
- Avoids bribery and kickbacks, and
- Chooses long-term reputation over short-term profit.

2 Some Indicators of an Unethical Organisation:

- Alters technical data to please clients
- Uses bribery to secure contracts
- Exploits employees
- Neglects safety and environmental standards
- Treats compliance as a burden rather than a duty

- Project failures
- Demoralised staff, high attrition
- Loss of reputation
- Legal penalties
- Public harm and social distrust, and
- Blacklisting by clients

Unethical behaviour is thus economically and morally unsustainable.

Being Ethical or Unethical

1 Advantages of Being Ethical:

- Reputation and Trust - Trust is the most valuable asset of consultancy firms. They attract serious clients and repeat business.
- Sustainable growth
- Employee loyalty and pride
- Staff feel proud to work in principled organisations, reducing attrition and improving productivity.
- Build stability and resilience.
- Ethical behaviour minimises legal, financial, and reputation risks.
- Better decision-making
- Long- term profitability
- Help build safe infrastructure and responsible industry and
- Contribution to society

2 Implications of Being Unethical:

Unethical behaviour may lead to:

- Some faster contract awards
- Lower apparent costs
- Higher short-term margins

Conclusion

An organisation mentored by ethics and integrity becomes not merely a commercial entity but a respected and coveted institution. Engineering consultancy, more than most professions, shapes industrial productivity, public safety and environmental sustainability. When consultants act unethically, the consequences can be catastrophic - unsafe structures, environmental degradation and damage, wasted public funds, and depletion of trust.

Conversely, when organisations solemnly resolve to abide by ethical principles, they create workplaces of confidence, dignity and mutual respect. Clients feel assured, employees feel secure, and society benefits from worthy engineering solutions. Such organisations may face short-term handicaps or losses but they earn long-term stability, influence and honour.

“Ethics = The Rule-book”
“Integrity = The Inner Compass”

A future, where more and more engineering consultancy firms embrace ethics and integrity is not only desirable but necessary. It will create a happier place - professionally and socially - when success is measured not only by profits but by principles, ethics and integrity.