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## Ethics and Standards of Professional Conduct

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# 1. Purpose of Ethics: Navigating Professional Conduct

**Learning Objectives** By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the continuous, lifelong nature of ethical development in your engineering practice.
- Evaluate your role as a mentor and leader in modeling ethical behaviors for your peers.
- Apply Canon 1 of the ASCE Code of Ethics as the foundational metric for all professional engineering decisions.

**Executive Summary:** Achieving an ethical professional career is a lifelong journey of continuous learning and peer engagement, not a static destination. As a practicing engineer, your ultimate baseline for every decision, design, and execution must be Canon 1: holding paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public.

## The Lifelong Ethical Journey

Your understanding of ethical behavior is not fixed; it will evolve dynamically with time, practical experience, and active discussion. To successfully navigate your career, commit to a lifetime of learning about professional conduct. Engage regularly with other engineers who are on a similar professional journey to refine your ethical judgment and share practical insights.

## Mentorship and Leadership Responsibilities

The responsibility to set the standard for ethical behavior falls heavily on employers and senior members of the profession. If you hold a position of authority or seniority, you must actively shape the culture of your organization.

To effectively mentor and lead, you must:

- **Model the Standard:** Demonstrate ethical behaviors in your daily life that junior engineers and peers can learn from.
- **Initiate the Conversation:** Actively raise questions and engage your colleagues in discussions about complex ethical issues.
- **Promote the Code:** Ensure your peers and colleagues recognize the necessity of reading and referencing the code of ethics frequently.



### The ASCE Code of Ethics and Public Trust

The ASCE Code of Ethics serves as the primary guidance for your personal and professional conduct. These guidelines are developed for your day-to-day business affairs and are expected to be known and practiced by all members.

#### Prioritizing the Canons

- **The First Canon:** You must hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public. This principle must be at the forefront of all decisions and the execution of your responsibilities.
- **The Supporting Canons:** The remaining six canons amplify the importance of Canon 1. They clearly define your responsibilities not only to the public, but also to your clients, your employers, and the wider engineering profession.

By actively addressing the issues of all these constituencies, you ensure the continued safety and quality of life of the public into the future. Furthermore, strict adherence to these principles earns and sustains the public trust necessary for you to perform your duties efficiently, safely, and economically.

⚠️ **Safety Constraint:** You must prioritize the safety, health, and welfare of the public above all other considerations. This obligation supersedes client demands, employer directives, and personal interests.

💡 **Expert Tip:** Treat the Code of Ethics as a daily operational tool rather than an abstract set of rules. Integrate brief ethical discussions or "what-if" scenarios into your regular team meetings and design reviews to build your team's ethical muscle memory.

#### Checkpoint Quiz

**Question 1:** What is the primary directive of Canon 1 of the ASCE Code of Ethics?

- A) Maximize the economical performance and profitability of the project.
- B) Hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public.
- C) Protect the confidential and proprietary information of the employer.
- D) Compete fairly with other engineering professionals for contracts.

Answer: B. Canon 1 mandates that the safety, health, and welfare of the public must be at the absolute forefront of all engineering decisions, designs, and executions.



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**Question 2:** According to the guidelines, whose responsibility is it to proactively model ethical behaviors and initiate discussions on ethical issues within a firm?

- A) Only the designated corporate compliance officer.
- B) Junior engineers who are currently seeking initial licensure.
- C) People in positions of authority, seniority, and employers.
- D) The external regulatory agencies overseeing the engineering project.

Answer: C. Employers and senior members of the profession bear the critical, ethical responsibility to model appropriate behaviors, set standards, and engage their peers in ongoing ethical discussions.



## 2. Definitions of Key Terms: Establishing Your Ethical Vocabulary

**Learning Objectives** By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Identify** critical ethical terminology encountered in your professional engineering practice.
- **Evaluate** professional situations to determine if they constitute conflicts of interest, bribery, or harassment.
- **Distinguish** between an employer's confidential proprietary information and publicly available data.

**Executive Summary:** To maintain the integrity of the engineering profession, you must operate from a shared understanding of key ethical concepts. Mastering these definitions empowers you to identify operational risks, protect proprietary information, and navigate complex professional relationships without compromising your ethical baseline.

### Financial and Influence Violations

When managing contracts, procurement, or client relations, you must clearly understand the definitions of illicit financial incentives:

- **Bribe:** Recognize a bribe as any gift or favor, whether explicitly given or merely promised, that carries the specific intent to influence the professional judgment or conduct of another person.
- **Kickback:** Identify a kickback as the illegal giving back of a portion of a payment received for work or services. This is executed as a means of obtaining or otherwise influencing the judgment or actions of another party, or with the expectation of receiving special treatment not afforded to all.

### Information Security and Asset Protection

Protecting your firm's data is a core professional responsibility. You must clearly differentiate between protected and public data:

- **Confidential or Proprietary Information:** Treat this as the exclusive property of your employer. Your employer holds the sole right to make this information available or withhold it from others within the firm or the general public as they deem appropriate.
  - **Covered Items:** Lists or information concerning clients, suppliers, personnel, or shareholders; competitive business strategies and plans; and special methods of operation.



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- **Exclusions:** Do not classify annual reports, quarterly reports, periodic public filings, or issued press releases as confidential once they are officially filed and public.

### Professional Boundaries and Relationships

Your personal and professional lives frequently intersect. Use these definitions to maintain clear boundaries:

- **Conflict of Interest:** Evaluate your engagements for any activity, transaction, relationship, service, or consideration that is, or even *appears* to be, contrary to your professional responsibilities. A conflict exists anytime your personal interests have the potential to be placed above your professional duties.
- **Outside Employment:** Define this as providing work or services for pay for an employer, including yourself (freelance or consulting), who is not your normal full-time employer.
- **Family Members:** Consider this group to include a spouse, children, parents, siblings, grandparents, in-laws, or any other person sharing the same home or otherwise in a close familial relationship with you.

### Workplace Quality and Conduct

- **Harassment:** You must recognize harassment as any unwelcome and offensive verbal or physical conduct of one person toward another. This conduct is based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or any other legally protected characteristic. It actively has the purpose or effect of creating a hostile work environment, interferes with an individual's work performance, or otherwise affects or harms an individual's employment opportunities.

⚠ **Safety Constraint:** Harassment, kickbacks, and bribes are not just ethical violations; they carry severe legal liabilities and professional consequences, including the potential loss of your PE license and civil or criminal prosecution.

💡 **Expert Tip:** When evaluating a potential Conflict of Interest or an Outside Employment opportunity, rely on radical transparency. If an activity even *appears* to be a conflict, proactively disclose the relationship to your employer in writing before engaging in it.