

On the War on Ethics¹

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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Dear David,

Having met you more than 20 years ago and having read your many great op-eds in PMWJ, I was touched and compelled to reflect on your perspective on the war on ethics or as you called it the Anti-Leadership. While I feel the same unfairness, dishonesty and worry about the state of PM, I tend to take different perspectives on the issue. In a nutshell, I rather see project management as a neutral tool, not linked to morals.

First, I think project management can be seen as a tool or a set of capabilities which is used for good and bad purposes. It produces benefits and dis-benefits, sometimes in parallel to different recipients. Some staff lose their job due to a restructuring project and others find new opportunities, a war project kills many people and enriches others like mercenaries or ammunition makers. Even generally regarded evil projects like 9/11 or the holocaust used project management practices and benefited some people. And what about the professionally crafted project to make abortion illegal in US and Texas?

Keeping moral judgements out of project management as a professional craftsmanship is mandatory to acknowledge new ways of working and expanding the body of knowledge.

It is different to me when humans get involved, if we talk about professionals, certifications, and a specific project that uses project management. Ethics are based on human values, which are almost the same everywhere in the world. We all feel that **fairness, respect, community, honesty, freedom, community, humility, compassion** are good and violations of these values trigger bad feelings like anger, hate and even violence. The late Rushworth Kidder published these 8 ubiquitous human values that

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developed through evolution in his book 'Morale Courage' (and 4 of them are the base for PMI's Code of Ethics, by chance).

As an example of an eminent ethical dilemma for project managers, we teach stakeholder management and are on knives edge when we influence stakeholders with our capabilities. Do we manipulate others or are we just showing them the right way for their own best? It depends. Our values and ethics are guiding us thru these situations.

Ethics in project management is more than a Code of Ethics we sign every year and sometimes an institution empowered to sanction misbehaviour. Ethics consists also of our daily perceptions, decisions, and behaviours. There is a nice article in HBR <https://hbr.org/2021/11/building-an-ethical-company> about how to improve ethical behaviours of employees (and we could extend this to certified project managers).

Good and evil are categories we deal with as humans, every day. And I think there is a balance, always has been. Like other tools, project management cannot and should not be tweaked to be on one side only. But humans using the tools should be enabled to judge well and decide ethically, depending on the situation.

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