

Professional ethics at team meetings

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At a review meeting, the ClfA Registered Organisation inspection team brought up the topic of professional ethics and the recently released ClfA (2017) Professional Practice Paper: An introduction to professional ethics. ClfA is in a process that is leading towards archaeologists being able to become chartered as individuals. Fluency with professional ethics will be a significant element in gaining that status. Therefore, Registered Organisations, responsible postholders and all members of ClfA have a shared interest in ensuring knowledge of this topic is increased.



Archaeology Collective team meetings

For our team, the ideal place to broaden knowledge of this topic has been at team meetings. We have a two-hour meeting once a month and we have a series of regular topics. There is health and safety, marketing, billing, CPD, project reviews and now, ethical dilemmas at work. The act of putting this as a regular item on our agenda made possible this article sharing our experience. It gives the subject parity with those other, more familiar topics. We allow around 10–15 minutes for each item (although it can vary), and we use this slot to discuss the ethical dilemmas team members have encountered in each month.

Finding a way in

The ClfA Professional Practice Paper (PPP) provides an excellent way into this topic; and we shouldn't underestimate how important it is to provide that at the early stages. Ethics is a broad topic and the very word 'ethical' is used to label things which are considered 'good'. The term has become loaded, and our first job is to define what we mean by professional ethics:

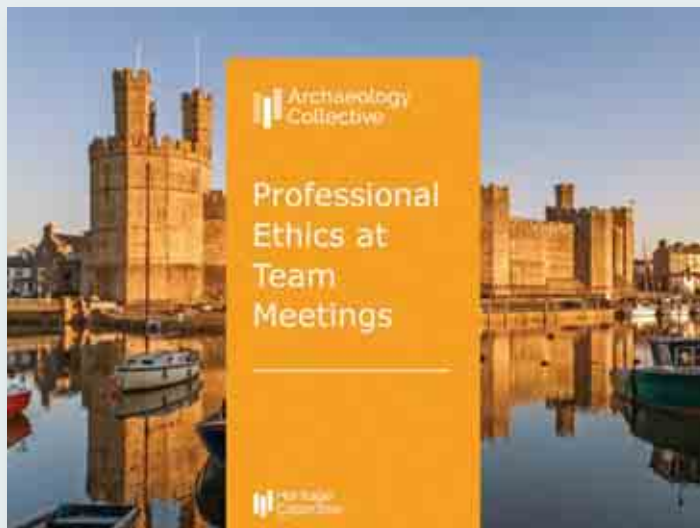
“Professional ethics are founded on values and transcribed into rules by professionals acting in the form of a professional association.”

(ClfA 2017: *An introduction to professional ethics*, 3).

The PPP introduces and defines professional ethics in a succinct way, and there are very useful tools to help shape the discussion of a specific dilemma. The approach we have adopted, and which is central within the paper, is the mnemonic RIGHT:

- R** what do the **rules** say?
- I** how do I act with **integrity** – that is, how do I integrate my values into my actions?
- G** to whom would the possible courses of action do the most **good**?
- H** to whom would the possible courses of action do the most **harm**?
- T** am I being **truthful**?

With that tool to hand, along with the varied case studies of situations covering 'conflicting priorities', there is enough material to cover at least eight separate sessions on the topic.



Benefits

Several of the ethical dilemmas that came up in our early discussions were actually ones that the PPP describes as ‘open and shut’ cases. That’s to say, there are readily available rules telling us what should happen in these situations.

More in-depth discussion of the ethical dilemmas our team encounters has prompted an increased awareness of the difference between ethics and the law, the ethical expectations of archaeologists set out in the ClfA *Code of conduct*, and those in our own Company Policy. This has been important to help staff recognise that certain issues are ‘legal’ obligations, as opposed to a code of conduct or a company policy.

The discussions around ethical dilemmas have broadened our use of these documents and increased familiarity. It was a benefit I had not seen coming and it helped me find a way into documents that otherwise can

make rare appearances at a team meeting. I now keep the *Code of conduct* (digital) and the Company Policy to hand and we can check if we are uncertain.

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Engagement at team meetings

Getting people talking and sharing views is a great way of getting more out of team meetings. If chaired well, with an eye on time spent and allowing space for different views, it can be a useful way of ensuring staff get a chance to speak about their work and ask questions about how and why something is done in a certain way.

Identifying gaps in knowledge

One of the key learnings (for me) from the discussions was the need to help staff feel able to challenge views and even rules. Why do we do it like that? This is not to say we won’t then follow the rule – but more that we explain the context and background to it. In this way we are identifying gaps in knowledge that can either be resolved there and then or which we could turn into an entirely separate CPD session.

Challenges

The ‘ethical’ conversation stopper

Ethics is the study of moral philosophy – but who decides which moral philosophy? Archaeologists should appreciate just how many different approaches there are now, and have been in the past, which held an entirely different view of what was the right approach to a given situation. One of my key challenges in initiating discussion on this topic has been to remind myself that the term ‘ethics’ is often used to mean ‘good’ by whichever group thinks of itself as holding the moral high ground on a certain issue. This can cloud and confuse discussion of an ethical dilemma, as people can be reluctant to say something that may not be seen as the ‘ethical’ view. The group, and especially the chair, has a role to play in allowing a diversity of answers. By so doing, the relative *ethicability* of a certain choice can be defined and discussed in relation to another answer.



Archaeology Collective team meeting in Leeds. Credit: Archaeology Collective

Resources needed

- The ClfA Professional Practice Paper is invaluable and tailored to our sector with case studies on topics that we will recognise from our professional lives.
- I have also found that the short book *Ethicability* by Roger Steare, from which the ClfA paper drew much inspiration, is very useful.
- Moral DNA.org (Roger Steare, The Corporate Philosopher, Moral DNA™). Has options for corporate and individual questionnaires to fill in. These can help you understand which approach you are likely to take in a given situation. The patterns associated with each approach are described in the book *Ethicability*.
- As for any meeting, it is essential to have a person willing to chair; it is important to watch the clock, to explain in a supportive way when a certain topic is open and shut (not a dilemma) or when it falls outside

of our professional sphere. Also, to ensure that different views are aired and that the discussion is not allowed to tilt towards a certain view – particularly because more people present in the room happen to hold it.



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