

## **Commentary**

### **Doing the Right Things and Doing Things Right**

Conference on Ethics and Engineering held on Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2003, Church House, London SW1.

In opening the event The Academy's President, Sir Alec Broers, DL FREng FRS, stressed the increasing importance of engineers addressing ethical issues. He added that the event was the result of work by a group of Fellows and distinguished advisers that had been asked by the Standing Committee for Engineering to examine further the issues involved and how The Academy might best address them. Particular thanks were due to those who were not engineers or Fellows of the Academy whose input had been invaluable in shaping the plans for the event and who in particular had brought wider perspectives from outside the profession (a full list of the Working Group is on The Academy's web site at: [www.raeng.org.uk](http://www.raeng.org.uk)).

In planning for the event the Working Group was conscious of the escalating significance of ethical issues to different stakeholders, that is, customers and consumers at large, investors, employees and the wider community and public. The term 'ethics' is a term often used broadly to embrace both moral and professional issues, sustainability and a wide universe of social and religious issues and beliefs. The Working Group had spent considerable time understanding what might be defined as 'professional ethics' from within this universe. Nevertheless, as several speakers at the seminar commented, there appears to be no precise distinction and different individuals bring varying perspectives and values.

John Cheffins (Rolls-Royce) commented that both for the engineer and the businessman there was not a simple right and wrong in ethical matters- it was often a matter of judgement, balance, and context. Indeed viewed from outside (the profession) the expectations and priorities of different stakeholders often varied, making for added complexity in reaching the 'right' decision. Being sensitive to external perspectives was important when reaching a balanced decision and acceptable risk, a point emphasised by Sir Duncan Michael (Arup) in his presentation. Both speakers gave examples where a dialogue between people with different views had produced answers that sacrificed apparent short-term advantage to protect the integrity of their businesses.

As Ken Rushton (FSA) commented in his presentation, professional standards and behaviours are very much in the public eye and media spotlight today, and this exposure conditions the perceptions and trust of the professions by the wider public. Engineering is no less involved than other professions although we have been spared some of the recent scandals and gross failures that have put other professions in the spotlight in recent times. Indeed, engineers need to work closely with other disciplines and many engineers hold positions of corporate responsibility in the business world. We cannot therefore regard this as someone else's problem.

We can all think of current examples where the engineer faces (even if not always recognised) ethical challenges and the pressure to make tradeoffs or compromises in technical excellence.

If the profession is to be respected and trusted we need to be on the front foot in thinking through these issues and not perceived as defensive by reacting after the event.

Although, as Rob Margetts (Legal & General) illustrated in his comments, professional ethical standards may be well established and formally codified in large businesses (in the UK and other places) it is not universally true. He gave examples of the kind of leadership that is required to protect standards in organisations. Whilst ethical and social responsibility may be on the formal agenda of companies mentioned by the speakers; ICI, Rolls Royce, Legal & General and Arup, many small businesses do not have the benefits of a well established corporate culture and the built-in checks and balances of the corporate world. We also have many recent examples of corruption and failures of governance in developed economies to illustrate the need for active maintenance of standards.

Today numerous engineers operate on a global scale exposing them to issues of different corporate, professional and social cultures. Engineers are also involved in applying new technologies which may exceed the boundaries of previous activities and have a potentially significant impact on wider society.

The Working Group has, through its discussions and interactions with interested parties, become aware that despite considerable interest in the topic by those responsible for shaping the future of the profession there was relatively little interaction between the different organisations, or with those outside the profession. In the first event therefore, it was decided to approach the topic not in a prescriptive way but to explore the different dimensions and expectations – both from within and outside the profession, and to involve a wide cross section of stakeholders.

The warm reception given to the speakers and the resulting discussion clearly illustrated the value of this approach and the ‘alternative’ perspectives from outside the profession given by Ken Rushton of the FSA and Sheila McLean, Professor of Law and Ethics in Medicine, were valuable contributions alongside the industry perspectives.

So, where next ?

Having set the scene and highlighted different perceptions the Working Group will now consider what next steps might be taken and in particular those that might encourage the creation of frameworks that provide some practical tools, promote best practice and knowledge transfer and also engage more comprehensively with the wider communities that are shaping the future of profession.

To do so in an open and transparent way will, we hope, contribute to The Academy’s agenda of ‘Facing Out’ and inspire greater public trust and confidence. It will also help reinforce The Academy’s influence and leadership.

There are many ways in which we might take these next steps and these will now be reviewed by the Working Group in some detail.

As a first practical step we are putting relevant information on The Academy's web site, both to promote the subject and encourage wider engagement amongst the Fellows at large.

Secondly, the discussion at the initial event was consistent with the Working Group view that we might bring together more focused groups to explore the topic in greater depth. Specifically:

- a) **The Institutions and other professional and regulatory bodies (incl EC(UK)) and government** to explore their roles and approaches. This would appear to be particularly timely as several engineering institutions are actively reviewing their members codes of conduct. John Cheffins in his presentation noted that there was some evidence that a strong regulatory approach led to increased public trust and confidence and this might be explored further.
- b) **Educators at all levels.** There is considerable interest in UK academic circles but the activity appears to be fragmented and not as developed as, for example, in the US. Many of the academics have commented that they feel somewhat isolated and lacking contemporary case studies and interaction with industry on this topic.
- c) **Businesses-** recognising that this is no longer dominated by industrial or UK centred giants that created the business and professional cultures that so many engineers and past business leaders have taken for granted.

and

- d) **The individual engineer** with responsibility as an expert, and for leadership, mentoring/coaching and continuing professional development.

In putting these four legs of the stool in place we will need the wider involvement of both Academy Fellows and other interested parties. Anyone with a particular interest is invited to contact Tony Eades (Tel 020 7227 0515: E-Mail to [ethics@raeng.co.uk](mailto:ethics@raeng.co.uk)) at The Academy or any member of the Working Group, or indicate their interest on-line via the web site.

Special thanks are due to the speakers, Sir Duncan Michael, Rob Margetts, John Cheffins (all Fellows of the Royal Academy of Engineering) together with Ken Rushton and Prof Sheila McLean, who all gave such informative and honest presentations and the 100+ Fellows and guests who attended the Seminar on 22<sup>nd</sup> September.

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*The above commentary is based on Closing Remarks delivered to the Seminar on 22/9/03*