Contemporary project management is multi-faceted and can be quite complex. With this in mind Dr John McManus FBCS CITP discusses the idea that ethical behaviour leads to better project management practice and therefore ultimately a better bottom line for business.

Many people collaborate to specify, build and deliver software systems. Stakeholders include customers, sponsors, domain experts and system users. Developers include analysts, designers, architects, programmers, quality assurance personnel and, of course, project managers. The people who participate may play many of these roles, but they always share a common need. All participants need to share a common understanding of the expectations or goals of the project.

The initial stages of a project usually involve the various stakeholders and the project manager. Each stakeholder has a viewpoint and opinion regarding the nature of the project to be delivered and the needs to be satisfied by the software solution. All these (sometimes disparate) viewpoints and opinions need inclusion, reconciliation and ethical representation at the project management level. The importance of effective leadership between the project manager and the stakeholders involved cannot be overstated. The quality of leadership and communication between people determines their commonality and sense of morality. In essence the project manager must be both a moral person and a moral leader.

When interacting with multiple stakeholders, communication, if undertaken in an ethical manner, will serve to legitimise and challenge falsehood. Amongst stakeholders communication should stimulate critical awareness of reality and help a person to distinguish truth from falsehood. Often it is necessary to develop alternative forms of language and communication so that ethical words and deeds can be realised. The translation of deeds comes from the acknowledgement that as a project manager you have duties and responsibilities to promote and defend the right to communicate to your managers, staff and other stakeholders in accordance with the following universal obligations:
Overcoming apathy to ethical considerations is one task the project manager must take the lead in.

- The obligation to respect the thoughts and ideas of all other people.
- The obligation to respect the expression of thoughts and ideas by all other people.
- The obligation to respect the privacy and security of all other people.
- The obligation to respect the creative work of all other people.
- The obligation to respect the pursuit of autonomous cultural development of other people.
- The obligation to share our knowledge and experience with other people.
- The obligation to participate in processes of public decision making and that capable leadership is chosen.

Invariably it is the project manager’s responsibility to understand these obligations and the limitations of the situation and the people he is engaged with. If anything, such engagements accentuate the need for ethical behaviour. Many of the project management methodologies in use today do not provide any guidance regarding how to describe and manage ethical problems. Project management methodologies presume that a problem to be solved (behavioural or ethical) will have been well articulated somewhere along the line. Invariably this is not the case. If anything, this misconception is the fuel that feeds mistrust. As Wastell notes ‘methodology becomes a fetish, a procedure used with pathological rigidity for its sake, not as a means to an end. Used in this way, methodology provides relief against anxiety; it insulates the practitioner from risks and uncertainties of real engagement with people and problems’.

If no methodology of project management considers ethical issues and their impact on stakeholder and client relationships, what then is the cost? In the last decade project management has had a history of ethical dilemmas (no more so than in the computing industry). Consequences of unethical behaviour in the computing industry have led to the loss of thousands of jobs, stress, suicide, lawsuits, bankruptcy and loss of reputation. Corporate scandals have placed ethics and governance high on the political and public agenda. Major project work undertaken by large IT service providers (and their project managers) on behalf of the government such as the NHS Connecting for Health programme are now being scrutinised more than ever by the media, the tax-paying public and government audit teams. Project leadership involves balancing many issues of a political, economic, social and commercial nature. Although few managers would go on record, amongst some of my peers, many believe that ethics is irrelevant because it gets in the way of achievement.

Overcoming apathy to ethical considerations is one task the project manager must take the lead in. One of the key characteristics of ethical leadership is that of being a role model through visible action. Most leadership positions in management involve removal from the day-to-day activities of coal-face operations. Senior executives rarely if ever deal face-to-face with middle ranking project managers or junior staff. It is the time old problem of decision makers being divorced from the front line entanglements that causes policies to be divorced from reality. Also, what often passes for professionalism is often simply a cover to maintaining the great divide between management and the rest of the organisation and its stakeholders. Understanding the extent and nature of the ethical problem is the project manager’s first step toward meeting this challenge. But it may be just as important to understand why it matters. There is substantial evidence that fairness is indispensable to institutional ethics and leadership success, contributing to effectiveness in measurable ways.

The project management and leadership imperative, then, is to translate this understanding into action by doing the hard work of building relationships based on consistently demonstrated ethical trust. As project managers, building trust involves learning what is right and what is wrong, and then doing the right thing. Even so, the right thing is not nearly as basic as conveyed as it may depend on the situation. Values that guide behaviour are moral values such as respect, honesty and fairness. Statements around how these values are applied are sometimes referred to as moral principles.

Consideration of ethics in project management will ensure that when a problem arises or confusion exists, project managers will have a sense of justice.

One of the primary motivations in writing this piece has been to highlight some of the issues faced in contemporary project management. On the surface, the idea that ethical behaviour leads to better project management practice is perhaps naively simplistic, but the anecdotal evidence seems to support it. So to summarise:

1. The basis of ethical leadership is being an ethical person. Individuals must think of you as having certain traits, engaging in certain kinds of behaviours and making decisions based on ethical principles.
2. Project managers need to recognise the importance of proactively putting ethics at the forefront of their agenda; project managers need to make the ethical dimension of their leadership explicit and salient to their subordinates.
3. Understanding the organisation and the extent and nature of the ethical problem is the leader’s first step toward meeting this challenge.
4. Stakeholders have different legal, economic and social relationships to a particular business project; sometimes a general stakeholder identification approach may not be too helpful in defining and explaining specific ethical obligations of managers to their stakeholders.
5. Overcoming apathy to ethical considerations is one task the project manager must take the lead in. One of the key characteristics of ethical leadership is that of being a role model through visible action.

References