

Professional Ethics and the
Nonprofessional Administrator

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Within academic circles one often hears something similar to the following proposition expressed.

Proposition, P_1 :

It is better to be administered by a trained administrator rather than an expert in the field being administered.

Especially this is heard at times when searches occur for new department chairmen when the faculty hold their rounds of discussions on what are the most desirable qualities to be specified. For the reason of professional ethics I would put forth another proposition.

Proposition, P_2 :

In a professional field it is necessary to be administered by a professional expert in the field being administered.

My observation is based upon over twenty years of carrying out engineering teaching and research at a number of universities throughout the world including Berkeley, Stanford and the University of Maryland. During this period I have seen some of the best possible administration and some of the worst, as well as much of the average. Perhaps the following might be considered as directed at avoidance of the worst while striving for the best. It should be commented, though, that until now engineering professional ethics have been little stressed in the academic world while being of paramount concern to a large number of engineering practitioners.

To proceed on a discussion it is necessary to make clear several terms. For this I will take as a "professional" a person trained, recognized, and practicing in a "professional field" where by the latter I mean a field where there are legally registered individuals who practice by virtue of being licensed through the State and who are thereby governed by a code of professional ethics. Such, for example, are law, medicine, and my own field of engineering. As illustrated by engineering, there are degrees of professionalism to a field since not all engineers are registered. But for our purposes here I will assume a field is a professional one if a significant number of its practitioners must be registered. In turn it is important to realize what is meant by a code of professional ethics, for indeed there seems to be considerable confusion among academics on this score, though to the registered professional it is clear what these are. They are recorded criteria setting up acceptable standards of behavior of practice within the field which are published by the professional society whose members constitute the key segment of the licensed professionals. For example in engineering there is the NSPE code (NSPE=National Society of Professional Engineers). It should be noted that the articles of these codes do not prescribe moral laws but rules which if violated cause damage to the professional field as a whole. Individuals outside of the profession may violate these rules and suffer no serious detrimental consequences, indeed when acting within the professional field such individuals may acquire significant personal gain while bringing considerable damage to the reputation of the field.

This latter is a very real and extremely dangerous possibility when we come to consider the case of a nonprofessional administering

professionals. For the administrator has direct control over many of the very activities upon which a professional must stake his (or her) reputation. As a case in point an administrator by executive order can proclaim that those under his (or her) supervision undertake activities which are unethical within the profession; the professionals are then caught between carrying out an unethical action or going against their supervisor. If the administration is not sensitive to this possibility, then the professional quickly gets labelled a trouble-maker if he adheres to the governing ethical rules or a traitor to the professional field if he gives in to the administration. The problem is particularly acute within a university where professional engineers may be practicing, since it is a common occurrence to have administrators outside of engineering over the engineering school. Such administrators may of course act in the best of faith, especially since no particular activity in their background may prepare them for even the smallest of such problems. And being outside of any of the ethical constraints of the profession the real sense of urgency felt by the professional will easily be missed and even considered a type of paranoia of the professionals.

The above discussion is worded in the abstract and, thus, in order to illustrate that the problems can be prevalent and serious, warranting definite concern, I present four types of cases. These represent actual cases to which my attention has been called, though abstracted and made hypothetical for presentation here.

Case 1:

At a large public institution a female engineer endeavored to teach a one-semester hour course on women in engineering but was

over-ruled by the administration. Later a non-engineer female administrator was hired to attract women into engineering with one of her first undertakings being to set up an almost identical course. The female engineer, the only one on the engineering faculty at the time, was completely ignored and never mentioned in the administration's publications concerning women in engineering. This administrator undoubtedly would have had to ethically defer to the engineer, through the professional code of ethics, had she been an engineer herself.

Case 2:

When a department chairman resigned at a major university a non-professional was assigned to administer the department until a new chairman was found. Not knowing the field his actions led to the hiring of non-engineering faculty who claimed engineering type expertise, this over the voice of senior and experienced engineers in the area. These latter were soon branded as having personnel problems when they spoke out to protect the institution as required by their code of ethics.

Case 3:

Two young engineering professors were assisted by a senior professional engineer in organizing a specialized seminar, at a research oriented university. As a professional engineer is ethically bound to give credit to those assisting in such a development, the senior engineer insisted that the administration recognize the involvement of all three in all activities associated with the seminar (advertisement, grading, credit toward advancement, etc.). This the administration refused, going so far as to reprimand the senior engineer, forcing all three engineers to take steps to protect their professional status.

Case 4:

An engineer is required to seek adequate compensation for engineering assignments. But at one major university the administration assigned an engineer an overload course to teach without any discussion and any compensation. When complaint was made to the administration, compensation was refused and arguments apparently fabricated to justify the actions, in this case perpetrated by an engineering dean. The engineer was then caught in the dilemma mentioned above.

This last case shows that even administration involving a professional is not fool proof, for even in the tightest of professional fields non-professional actions will occur. But the point is that these are correctable eventually through pressure exerted by the professional field through its code of ethics. In the case of actions by non-professionals against professionals that self-regulation mechanism is completely missing. Consequently, though people from two fields may have similar technical backgrounds, as say physicists and engineers, there may be a great difference between the way people from the two fields may act administratively. This accounts, I believe, for one of the reasons we find electrical engineering split in many universities into two portions, the electrophysic's class and the engineering system's class. Certainly this difference should be recognized in administrative hiring practices where professionals are concerned. These points are especially important at my University, in Maryland, in engineering where faculty have been required to take psychiatric and other examinations in order

to use University facilities in their teaching and where very high, elected public officials have been forced from office because they undertook transactions with engineers carrying out professionally unethical practices. Of course, professional ethics are not a cure-all for the many ills which beset administration, especially public administration. Indeed, ethical codes rely upon human actions to be of any effect. In recent years, though, in engineering there has been a definite renewal of interest in having meaningful realistic codes which can be enforced, and in these years we have seen more than lip-service given to the actual enforcement. Scarcely, should these be considered presently to be of empty content.

Returning to the original propositions, I would add a third, rather idealistic one directed at obtaining the best.

Proposition, P₃:

In a professional field it is best to be administered by a (humane) professional expert in the field being administered who also has been trained in administration.

In summary, a good case can be made on professional ethics' grounds to have professionals administered as far as possible by other professionals. This is especially true where public activities are concerned, as for the faculty in a university. Even the best intentioned of administrators will make mistakes but only those bound to a profession by its ethical code are required to correct their mistakes -- in this, administrative behavior following along professional ethical lines can make a big difference in the quality of the institution.