Learning from Others Key to Achieving the Best Ethical Outcomes

Myra L. Peak

Editor’s note: Do you have a tale you’d like to share—good or bad—about life as a soil scientist or an experience you’ve had in the field? If so, email it to Dawn Ferris at dferris@sciencesocieties.org. You may remain anonymous if you like.

When confronted with an ethical situation, we often do not know the best choice of words. We may also not know the best approach to use. There are people all around us from whom we can learn new ideas about ethics—and they need not be in our professions. Ethics are tied to customer service, negotiations, and the Golden Rule.

Recently, I was talking to a client on my cell phone while my eight-year-old was playing in the back seat. After my conversation ended, she says, “Mama, you should have said, ‘We should see if there is benzene in the soil’ not ‘You need to find out if it is contaminated before you sell.’” Her point was that saying “we” is better than “you or I” and that I should not assume there is contamination no matter how likely that is. She may have been an unlikely source to teach me customer service skills, yet she showed me that word choices, options, and the presentation of the information go a long way in achieving a more ethical outcome with my client.

Instinctively, we may know what the ethical decisions should be, but we may not have a road map for how to get there. An associate may offer us examples of words to use, but that person’s style may not be our own. Parents advise children about what to say to problematic friends, but adults’ word choices don’t always fit with what a child feels comfortable saying.

Who can we turn to when we need advice on ethics or how to best “present” the suggestions to our associates or clients? Listen for verbal and physical cues from everyone. Ask associates and even more familiar clients how they have handled professional situations—they’ll be flattered that you’re seeking their advice. Should we wait until a difficult emotional time passes, present an idea on a day when the associate is emotionally “up,” or allot enough time for discussion? Being attentive to “presentation” timing and style can result in a more positive ending.

Sharing information with our coworkers about our customers is important. I have an employee who knows one of our clients well, so I let him do the talking. Learning others’ style and personalities is critical to project success. Our style is comparable to how food is presented in a restaurant. Good presentation can go a long way in making the overall dining experience a good one. Do our techniques contribute to the overall ethical experience?

One technique might be to offer your client the best plan first and the least desirable one second. For example, let’s say you are speaking with a client about an oil spill and say “You could remove the contaminated soil after we sample it or leave it in place and hope the groundwater isn’t affected.” With the latter option, the client may have a more expensive groundwater cleanup and maybe a notice of violation from the state.

Customer service skills, negotiation skills, and the Golden Rule are integral to ethics if we are striving for the best resolution. If we know certain information or methods, we may assume that others do. In fact, others may not know everything that we think we know, and for all of us, there is much to be learned on a daily basis about choices and styles. We should continually learn and expand our skills to promote ethical results.

For years, I rode in a van with about eight other supervisors. I’d hear Frank White, Ed Kubiak, and Roman Soto talk about how they would deal with difficult equipment operators. All the while, I knew that I was not Frank, Ed, or Roman.
I could not say exactly what they were saying nor could I take on their style. What I could do was learn a little from each and incorporate that into how I dealt with my crew.

Many of us are in the business of “people” not just science. We may respect our intuition, but we may not know how to get the desirable ending. Listening to everyone, even the unlikely ones, helps us build the road map and vehicle for our journey. Our internal barometers will guide us as we learn how to confront ethical dilemmas and achieve better results for all concerned.

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Want to learn more about ethics? Check out the archived version of a recent webinar presented by Dawn Ferris titled “Ethics: Or, That Little Grey Area You Need to Pay Attention To...” at www.soils.org/certi-1f1cations/cpss-cpsc/self-study. The cost is $25. CEUs available for certified professionals.