**Workplace Ethics**



**Purpose**

This tutorial focuses on ethics in the workplace. Ethics deals with right and wrong, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, reliability, principles, moral codes, values and so on. (Note that ‘ethics’ is one of those English words that ends in ‘s’ and thus looks plural, but it is treated as singular: ethics is, ethics, deals, ethics guides).

Ethics is based on the recognition of certain human rights. Unethical behaviour has the potential to harm others.

Ethics guides how people conduct themselves in every aspect of their lives, including the workplace. Many human resource professionals, as well as hiring managers, understand the importance of hiring people of integrity. Honest, hardworking employees increase overall morale, improve a company's reputation, and help ensure a business's long-term success.

If you end up managing or employing others, you will also expect them to behave ethically. If they do not, you will have endless performance management problems.

Watch this video for a short introduction to workplace ethics. As you watch, note as many aspects of ethical behaviour in the workplace as you can.

Shapiro, D. (Robert H. Smith Business School). (2013). Ethics in the workplace. (4:24). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFJvO0UtcFQ>.

**Learning Outcomes**



You will be able to demonstrate a basic understanding on the implications of ethics in the workplace for employers and employees and find examples of codes of conduct relevant to your chosen field of work.

**Key points**

This tutorial explores the following topics:

**Perspectives**

We should perhaps differentiate between a *work ethic* and *workplace ethics*. By *work ethic* we usually imply that someone works hard, is value for money as an employee or someone whom we have hired for a service. *Workplace ethics* have a wider meaning, encompassing the honest behaviour of employers, employees, contractors, consultant, practitioners of various kinds, beneficiaries, the general public, clients, patients, learners and parents, and anyone involved in the work being done.

Some people have only to satisfy their employer or a client that they will diligently and honestly carry out the work they have contracted to do. Others have an employer on one side and a client on the other or even the general public.

Some employers are highly ethical while others are not. There was a case a few years ago of the owner of a small engineering firm on the east rand telling his employees that they were not going to get their Christmas bonus and that having their jobs was their bonus. He and his family then went off to Paris for two weeks while the employees had a miserable Christmas. When they went back to work, the factory was locked up and never reopened. The owner did not even have the decency to contact them and tell them not to come to work.

Some employees are highly ethical while others are less so. Some are not competent: they misrepresent their qualifications or knowledge and skills. Some are lazy. Some see ‘perks’ in the job that are actually not honest: for instance, they abuse the sick leave system or make photostats for their children’s school projects.

Private practitioners might also misrepresent their qualifications, knowledge and skills and it can come at a severe cost to the people paying them.

Not that clients always behave ethically either. They might also try to make a professional compliant in their unethical behaviour such as defrauding the South African Revenue Services.

Bear all these perspectives in mind when you work through this tutorial.

**Conduct in the workplace**

A key component of workplace ethics and behaviour is integrity, or being honest and doing the right thing at all times. For example, health care employees who work with mentally or physically challenged patients must possess a high degree of integrity, as must those who manage and work primarily with money. Workers with integrity also respect confidentiality while on the job.

All companies specify what is and is not acceptable behaviour when hiring an employee. Many even summarise expected conduct in job descriptions or during the interview process.

In the workplace, codes of conduct deal broadly with ethics and might address topics such as harassment, working hours, work attire, and language. Workers who do not follow codes of conduct may receive verbal or written warnings, and could ultimately be fired.

You can do an online search for codes of conduct/ behaviour/ ethics similar to the ones below that would apply to your chosen profession. Note what is considered ethical behaviour in that code. If you cannot find online a code specific to the work you will be doing, you might look at one of those given below.

* Allied Health Professions of South Africa: <https://ahpcsa.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/39531_18-12_NationalGovernment-1.pdf>.
* Engineering Council of South Africa: <https://www.ecsa.co.za/regulation/RegulationDocs/Code_of_Conduct.pdf>.
* Law Society: <https://www.lssa.org.za/upload/files/LPC/LPC%20FINAL%20CODE%20OF%20CONDUCT%20OF%20CONDUCT(1).pdf>.
* Public Service Commission of South Africa: <http://www.psc.gov.za/documents/code.asp>.
* South African Council for Educators: <https://www.sace.org.za/pages/the-code-of-professional-ethics>.
* South African Institute of Chartered Accountants: <https://www.saica.co.za/TechnicalInformation/Discipline/CodeofProfessionalConduct/tabid/701/language/en-ZA/Default.aspx>.

Many professional bodies lay down professional codes of behaviour – Health Professions Council of South Africa, Engineering Council of South Africa, South African Institute of Chartered Accountants, to name but a few. Where this occurs, continued registration with that professional body, or the right to practise that profession, could be withdrawn if there is evidence of unethical behaviour.

Some fields of work are not governed by professional bodies so the only code of conduct or ethics will be that provided by the employer. For instance, the university’s code of conduct includes sections on principles; value statements; diligence; equity and respectful treatment; outside work; conflicts of interest; use of university resources; gifts and benefits; fraud and corruption; improper influencing and bribery; use of official, confidential and personal information; health and safety and public comment on behalf of the university.

Taking responsibility for your actions is another major factor when it comes to workplace ethics and behaviour. That means showing up on scheduled workdays or for scheduled appointments as well as arriving on time and putting in an honest effort while on the job. People who exhibit accountability are honest when things go wrong, then work toward a resolution while remaining professional all the while.

A vital aspect of the world of work is working well with others. That includes everyone from peers to supervisors to customers. While not all employees will like each other, they need to set aside their personal or even work-related differences to reach a higher goal. In many instances, those who are not considered ‘team players’ can face demotion or even termination. On the other hand, those who work well with others can often advance on that aspect alone, with teamwork sometimes outweighing even performance.

Ethical and behavioural guidelines in the workplace often place high importance on dedication. Although possessing the necessary skills is essential, a strong work ethic and positive attitude toward the job can carry you a long way. Furthermore, diligence is often viewed in the business world as ‘contagious’, meaning that employees who behave ethically can often inspire their colleagues to do the same. Conversely, a toxic employee can inspire bad behaviour.

**Professional and ethical behaviour in the workplace**

Professionalism and ethical behaviour in the workplace can benefit your career and improve your working environment. Understanding examples of professional and ethical behaviour can help you develop your own effective work habits. Be conscious of how you treat colleagues, superiors and subordinates or your clients. Fairness should be a watchword for someone wanting to behave ethically. Be aware of your attitude to improve your effectiveness.

***Communication***

Speak the truth at all times but do so with respect and consideration for the feelings of others. Ethical treatment of your colleagues, managers and clients means being respectful of the need for efficient and accurate communication.

Refrain from repeating office gossip, as helping to spread false or demeaning information regarding a colleague is considered unethical.

Communication is a two-way process. Read and listen carefully, especially if you have to respond. For example, follow the instructions on company memos and ask questions only after you have thoroughly read the information. Asking questions about information that is clearly marked on company correspondence is unprofessional and presents the image of someone who does not follow instructions. Listen carefully to a client’s briefing so that you can ask the right questions and understand the brief fully.

***Meetings***

Meetings are regular occurrences in the world of work. By following meeting etiquette, you can improve your professional image. Be prepared to contribute to the meeting by reviewing the agenda in advance, and arriving on time. Recognise each speaker who has the floor and do not try to talk over someone else. Meetings are a good place to practise careful listening. Be respectful of the meeting chairperson and follow the format of the meeting, which would include using the proper times to ask questions. An agenda will often have ‘**Confidential’** marked on it: respect that confidentiality. Do not go straight back to the office and tell everyone what happened at the meeting when it could bring people into disrepute or leak confidential company information that could give the business an edge if kept among a select few.

***Time Management***

Why is time an aspect of ethical behaviour? If you are employed, you have a moral obligation to work the hours contracted – time is money. If you arrive fifteen minutes late or leave thirty minutes early every day, how many hours do you waste in the year – time for which you are being paid? If it takes you half an hour from setting foot in the building to sitting down in your office because you stop to chat to everyone, that is not ethical. Make a plan such as arriving at work early so that you can say hello to colleagues and get tea or coffee before your work is scheduled to start. Follow the lunch and break schedules by leaving when you are scheduled and returning on time.

Whether employed or in private practice, before beginning your day, check your work schedule so that you know where you have to be and at what time. There is a saying: ‘Punctuality is the politeness of kings’ – you are being disrespectful when you keep others waiting or they have to start a meeting without you.

***Employee Safety***

Ethics is a two-way street in terms of occupational health and safety. The employer should not cut corners, endangering the health and safety of employees. Conversely, employees should follow safety guidelines and not endanger others. It is the responsibility of each employee to report suspicious people in the office or misconduct committed by company employees. Company policies are designed to create a safe workplace. By reporting violations of company policy, you are doing your part in maintaining a high standard of ethics in your office that will keep employees and visitors safe. For example, fire exits that are not properly maintained should be reported immediately for repair. Employees who do not follow the regulations in regard to proper disposal of cigarettes in the break area could be causing a fire hazard, and that should be brought to the attention of management.

***Financial accountability***

Many jobs entail responsibility for a departmental or project budget. It is essential that all money be used as stated in planning documents and that transactions are transparent and documented. Financial dishonesty and mismanagement are rife if news headlines and high profile investigations are anything to go by.

**Good behaviour in the workplace**

Every employer's dream would be to have employees with exemplary behaviour, making management of employees an easy task. With so many issues in the workplace, employers breathe a sigh of relief when they appoint an employee who understands ethical behaviour and does not cause constant disciplinary problems.

Look at these tips to be one of those dream employees:

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| --- | --- |
| **Good Behaviour** | **Discussion** |
| Having a positive ‘can-do’ attitude. | Be ready, willing and able to get the job done, and done well. Do not, however, volunteer for work when you know you cannot do it either because of lack of time or competence. You might think volunteering will make you look good but failing will have the opposite effect. You should seek out quality work to remain productive for the company and eagerly go above and beyond your normal duties if feasible to stretch yourself as well as bring further success to the company. Avoid ‘busy work’ that is not challenging. |
| Being courteous and friendly | If you do your best to be courteous and friendly to your colleagues, managers, and customers, you will make the workplace much more pleasant than if you seek to cause disturbances or drama. Leave your ego at the door to maintain a good work atmosphere. While no-one is perfect and everyone has bad days, you should try to rise above such issues. We are affected by issues outside of work – family, illness, finances – and they are in our mind and affecting our attitude and focus. You might make your manager or your colleagues aware of this. But you also need to resolve problems in your personal life so that a chaotic home life, for instance, does not continually disrupt your work. |
| Meeting deadlines | If you meet deadlines, you will also likely be well-organised and responsible. If you are present at work and, particularly, at meetings pertaining to the project deadline, and avoid distractions you will very likely meet your deadlines in a timely manner. It is unethical to neglect your work so that your colleagues have to fill in for you all the time. |
| Taking responsibility | Your attitude to making mistakes is important. They are learning opportunities. If you value your work, your word, and your future with the company, you will take responsibility and admit the error. It is very useful to be able to add ‘I now intend to do x, y and z to correct the problem’. Making mistakes may or may not cause big problems with a project or with the company in general, but when you honestly explain an oversight or mistake, your employer or colleagues will have a better understanding of the issue and, even better, they will understand that you value your integrity and their trust in you. |
| Exercising good attendance and punctuality | Being at the office and arriving on time help your employer and colleagues know that they can trust you to be there each day. Employers know all too well about employees who frequently arrive late with a variety of excuses, possibly missing or at least being late for early-morning meetings, so a punctual and available employee will provide them with peace of mind. A manager will understand the occasional problem but a pattern of problems labels you as unreliable and possibly opens you up to disciplinary procedures. |

**Table 1**

**Five factors that demonstrate a strong work ethic**

If you possess have a strong work ethic, you get the job done, no matter what. You require less oversight on daily activities and managers are able to rely on you to complete bigger tasks. If someone is managing your diary, he or she needs to know that you will meet commitments for appointments. If a client is waiting for you to arrive on site or to finish a project by a deadline, he or she wants to know you are reliable.

Let us look at five factors that demonstrate a strong work ethic.

***1. Professionalism***

Professionalism is actually observable from first to last. You dress appropriately for the particular setting. You arrive on time. You are courteous to colleagues and clients. You understand your job and are prepared to do it. You are accountable for your knowledge and skills as well as your outputs

***2. High productivity***

To-do lists are organised so that you know you are able to devote the required time to any one task or project. If you work in an office, you might organise your day into blocks. For example, the first two hours might be to respond to customer calls and new orders. Then, the next two hours might be devoted to sales calls. You could then use the afternoon to prepare new proposals and do administrative work that is required, so your desk is cleared before you leave for the day. Having a routine and being organised increases productivity. People with this trait simply get more done.

***3. Teamwork and cooperation***

Part of having a strong work ethic is understanding that you are part of a bigger team and that everyone has a role. This understanding fosters teamwork and cooperation to ensure that everyone gets the right information to do their jobs properly. Since those with strong work ethics tend to be more productive and efficient with their time, they might free up time to help others to get more done. If you have a strong work ethic, you are not looking at what you need to get done: you are looking at what needs to get done for the business to succeed. You are a team player.

***4. Determination to succeed***

Having internal/ intrinsic motivation to succeed leads to a strong work ethic. You will happily accept external/ extrinsic motivation such as a bonus or other incentives, but that is not why you work hard and act responsibly. For you, success is not finishing something or meeting a deadline only: it is doing it well. It is your personal brand.

***5. Consistent and high-quality work***

Part of your integrity, your wholeness, is being true to yourself, behaving up to your own high expectations. You do not produce well one day then let your standards drop the next. Consistency is a mark of quality – it makes your reliable.

**Unethical behaviour in the workplace**

Ethics is based on the recognition of certain human rights. We stated this earlier but it is worth repeating and explaining.

You have the right not to be deliberately deceived. You have the right not to be forced to go against your conscience. You have the right to expect other parties to live up to their commitments and to behave according to the law. In the workplace, an employer has the right to expect an employee to behave according to company policy.

***Deliberate Deception***

Deliberate deception includes taking credit for work done by someone else; calling in sick in order to go to the beach; sabotaging the work of another person and, in sales, misrepresenting the product or service to get the sale. There are many examples of deliberate deception, but these few examples show how damaging deception can be by using a person's trust to undermine their rights and security. In a workplace environment, this results in conflict and retaliation. In terms of clients, it can result in lawsuits from deceived customers.

***Violation of conscience***

Your sales manager calls you into his office and threatens to fire you unless you sell fifty large toasters. You know the large toasters are inferior products, so you have been selling the small toasters to your customers instead. To keep your job, you must violate your conscience and recommend that your customers buy the large toasters. Your manager is engaging in unethical behaviour by forcing you to do something you both know is wrong, and also risking the anger and potential loss of valuable customers to meet a product sales goal. The manager may be engaging in unethical conduct because top management has forced him by threatening his job, too. Unethical behaviour often causes more unethical behaviour.

***Failure to honour commitments***

Your manager promises you an extra day off if you rush out an important project by a certain date. You work late hours and finish the project before the deadline. Ready for your day off, you mention it to your manager who responds, ‘No, we have too much work to do’. Your manager is engaging in unethical behaviour that virtually guarantees your future distrust and unwillingness to extend yourself to assist in departmental emergencies. In addition, you are likely to complain to your colleagues, causing them to distrust the promises of the manager and be unwilling to cooperate with her requests.

***Unlawful Conduct***

Padding an expense account with non-business expenses, raiding the supply cabinet to take home pens and notebooks, and passing around unregistered or pirated software are examples of unlawful conduct in the workplace. The person who steals from the company by padding his or her expense account or taking supplies for personal use risks losing his or her job. If a company decides to overlook such theft on the basis of maintaining employee morale by not firing a popular employee, other employees will also steal so they can feel they are getting the same deal as their colleague. Passing around pirated software, if discovered by the manufacturer, could cost the company through lawsuits and fines.

***Disregard of company policy***

Sexual harassment is often the subject of internal policy but it is also a criminal offence so it might result in lawsuits as well as internal disciplinary action. An employer is understandably concerned about avoiding lawsuits and angry employees or customers, because those things negatively affect profit and reputation. Most employers clearly state company policies against deception, coercion, and illegal activities. They also strive to convey an image of trustworthiness to their customers and employees. Corporate trustworthiness helps retain customers and valued employees, and the loss of either also negatively affects business. To disregard company policy is unethical, because it has the potential to harm the company and other employees.

This short video demonstrates s really unethical business practice. Can you list at least three aspects of the unethical behaviour?

Kantola Training Solutions. (2016). Workplace ethics. (1:23). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qR3isRhTQFQ>.

You might have heard of *whistleblowing* – it is a tool to alert or bring attention to unethical or even illegal behaviour while protecting the person raising the alarm. Employees who note unethical behaviour by a colleague or a company report it confidentially. Some whistleblowing is done to the press, which is bad for an organisation’s reputation. It is better for that organisation to set up a trusted confidential whistleblowing line backed up by a policy so that unethical behaviour can be dealt with in-house. But employees must trust it or they will not use it. That means that reports have to be investigated and no attempt must be made to reveal who blew the whistle. It is a tool that might be open to abuse so the organisation has to conduct a proper investigation to ensure that the accuser and accused are treated fairly.

**Ten characteristics of professionalism**

Being a professional in your chosen field means much more than wearing the appropriate clothes (a coat and tie/ lab coat/ overalls and hard hat/ uniform, etc.) or possessing a degree or professional affiliation. Professionalism also has to do with how you conduct yourself in your business dealings. True professionals possess a number of important characteristics that can apply to virtually any field of work.

***1. Appearance***

A professional dresses appropriately for the setting. Be sure to meet or even exceed the requirements of your company's dress code, and pay special attention to your appearance when meeting with clients or patients or parents or whoever benefits from your expertise.

***2. Demeanour***

Your demeanour (the way you behave) should show confidence, but not aggressiveness. Be polite and well-spoken, whether you are interacting with clients, superiors, or colleagues. You need to keep calm, even during tense situations.

***3. Reliability***

As a professional, people will count on you to apply your knowledge and skills to solve their problems, to fulfil their dreams, to get the job done. Responding to people promptly and following through on promises in a timely manner are important, as this behaviour demonstrates reliability.

***4. Competence***

Professionals strive to become experts in their field, which sets them apart from others. This can mean continuing your education by taking courses, attending seminars, and attaining any related professional designations. Many professions actually require that people earn CPD (continuing professional development) points annually to retain their registration with the professional body.

***5. Becoming conduct***

Professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and public accountants must adhere to a strict code of ethics. Even if your company or industry does not have a written code, you should display ethical behaviour at all times.

***6. Maintaining your poise***

A professional must maintain his or her poise even when facing a difficult situation. For example, if a colleague or client treats you in an aggressive manner, you should not resort to the same type of behaviour.

***7. Phone etiquette***

Your phone etiquette is an important component of professional behaviour. This means identifying yourself by your full name, company, and title when you place or take a call. Be sure not to dominate the conversation and listen carefully to the other party.

***8. Written correspondence***

During written correspondence, keep your letters or e-mails or reports brief and to the point. Your tone should be polite and formal.

***9. Organisational skills***

A professional can quickly and easily find what is needed or should have administrative assistance that can ensure that. Your work area should be fairly neat and organised, and your briefcase, if you use one, should contain only what is needed for your appointment or presentation.

***10. Accountability***

Professionals are accountable for their actions at all times. Accountable is a step beyond ‘responsible’: if you have to make sure others do the work, and they do not or do it badly or not according to the project brief, you are ultimately accountable, you will take the blame. If you make a mistake, own up to it and try to fix it, if possible. If it was someone reporting to you who made the mistake, you need to manage that person’s performance to ensure it does not happen again. If your company made the mistake, take responsibility and work to resolve the issue**.**

**Assessment**



Based on the material covered in this tutorial, select the correct answer for each of the following:

**Question 1**

If you make a mistake while on the job that you cannot immediately correct, what is the best course of action?

1. Ignore it and hope it will go unnoticed.
2. Try to fix it before anyone else notices.
3. Go to your superior and explain what happened as honestly as you can.
4. Say they shouldn't have put you on that project in the first place.
5. Blame it on a colleague if anyone does notice.

**Question 2**

What is an example of good employee behaviour?

1. Letting others take the credit for work you have done.
2. Meeting deadlines at least 90% of the time.
3. Never taking an unfriendly remark personally.
4. Being honest, courteous, punctual and productive.
5. Getting promoted as fast as possible.

**Question 3**

With regards to professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and accountants, which of the following statements applies?

1. Professionals do not have to adhere to certain ethical rules in small organisations.
2. Professionals must adhere to a strict code of ethics or risk losing registration.
3. Clients must be treated ethically or they can report you to your Council.
4. Even if the profession doesn't have a written code, you should behave ethically.
5. Professionals adhere to their own code of ethics and no other ethical rules.

**Question 4**

In terms of company policies on behaviour, which of the following statements applies?

1. Behaviour guidelines typically address a range of values-based and legal compliance topics.
2. Many companies stipulate expected conduct in job advertisements.
3. Most companies have a take it or leave it approach and do not enforce them.
4. Companies do not have to specify what is or is not ethical behaviour as it is covered in law.
5. Workers who don't follow codes of conduct may be fired after due notice.

**Question 5**

Your superior complains to you that you barely or rarely make it to the office on time. What is the best response?

1. Tell your superior that it's not your fault – traffic is bad you drop your children at school.
2. Ignore the complaint and try to change the subject.
3. Make a change to ensure it does not happen again: e.g. try different routes.
4. Ask your superior why it matters. You're doing your job, aren't you?
5. Start a grievance procedure against your manager for unfair discrimination.

MEMORANDUM

**Question 1**

c)

**Question 2**

d)

**Question 3**

b)

**Question 4**

a)

**Question 5**

c)