ETHICS OF TEAM WORK*

William Frey

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Abstract

This module developed for classes in Engineering and Computer Ethics at UPRM employs a value/virtue
approach to encourage students to reflect on the ethical issues and problems that arise in group or team
work. Throughout the class, students are given group assignments for which they receive group grades
that are distributed to each individual member. The module then provides students with ethical goals
to grade them as they execute these assignments. Student groups develop strategies for realizing these
goals. They also envision pitfalls that often prevent groups from working cooperatively such as the Abi-
lene Paradox, groupthink, and group polarization. Finally, students develop an assessment process based
on these goals that they use to complete a group self-evaluation at the end of the semester. The primary
purpose of this module is to use group work and cooperative learning as an occasion to reflect on the
different ethical issues and problems that arise in collective activity. This module is being developed as a
part of an NSF-funded project, "Collaborative Development of Ethics Across the Curriculum Resources

- Ethics of Team Work
- William J. Frey (working with material developed by Chuck Huff at St. Olaf College
- Centro de la Etica en las Profesiones
- University of Puerto Rico - Mayaguez

1 Module Introduction

Much of your future work will be organized around group or team activities. This module is designed to
prepare you for this by getting you to reflect on ethical and practical problems that arise in small groups like
work teams. Four issues, based on well-known ethical values, are especially important. How do groups achieve
justice (in the distribution of work), responsibility (in specifying tasks, assigning blame, and awarding credit),
reasonableness (ensuring participation, resolving conflict, and reaching consensus), and honesty (avoiding
deception, corruption, and impropriety)? This module asks that you develop plans for realizing these moral
values in your group work this semester. Furthermore, you are provided with a list of some of the more
common pitfalls of group work and then asked to devise strategies for avoiding them. Finally, at the end of
the semester, you will review your goals and strategies, reflect on your successes and problems, and carry
out an overall assessment of the experience.
2 Module Activities

1. Groups are provided with key ethical values that they describe and seek to realize through group activity.
2. Groups also study various obstacles that arise in collective activity: the Abilene Paradox, Groupthink, and Group Polarization.
3. Groups prepare initial reports consisting of plans for realizing key values in their collective activity. They also develop strategies for avoiding associated obstacles.
4. At the end of the semester, groups prepare a self-evaluation that assesses success in realizing ethical values and avoiding obstacles.
5. Textboxes in this module describe pitfalls in groups activities and offer general strategies for preventing or mitigating them. There is also a textbox that provides an introductory orientation on key ethical values or virtues.

3 Value Profiles for Professional Ethics

1. Definition - A value "refers to a claim about what is worthwhile, what is good. A value is a single word or phrase that identifies something as being desirable for human beings." Brincat and Wike, Morality and the Professional Life: Values at Work
2. Reasonableness - Defusing disagreement and resolving conflicts through integration. Characteristics include seeking relevant information, listening and responding thoughtfully to others, being open to new ideas, giving reasons for views held, and acknowledging mistakes and misunderstandings. (From Michael Pritchard, Reasonable Children)
3. Responsibility - The ability to develop moral responses appropriate to the moral issues and problems that arise in one's day-to-day experience. Characteristics include avoiding blame shifting, designing overlapping role responsibilities to fill responsibility "gaps", expanding the scope and depth of general and situation-specific knowledge, and working to expand control and power.
4. Respect - Recognizing and working not to circumvent the capacity of autonomy in each individual. Characteristics include honoring rights such as privacy, property, free speech, due process, and participatory rights such as informed consent. Disrespect circumvents autonomy by deception, force, or manipulation.
5. Justice - Giving each his or her due. Justice breaks down into kinds such as distributive (dividing benefits and burdens fairly), retributive (fair and impartial administration of punishments), administrative (fair and impartial administration of rules), and compensatory (how to fairly recompense those who have been wrongfully harmed by others).
6. Trust - According to Solomon, trust is the expectation of moral behavior from others.
7. Honesty - Truthfulness as a mean between too much honesty (bluntness which harms) and dishonesty (deceptiveness, misleading acts, and mendaciousness).
8. Integrity - A meta-value that refers to the relation between particular values. These values are integrated with one another to form a coherent, cohesive and smoothly functioning whole. This resembles Solomon's account of the virtue of integrity.

4 Exercise 1: Developing Strategies for Value Realization

- Design a plan for realizing key moral values of team work. Your plan should address the following value-based tasks
- How does your group plan on realizing justice? For example, how will you assign tasks within the group that represent a fair distribution of the work load and, at the same time, recognize differences in individual strengths and weaknesses? How does your group plan on dealing with members who fail to do their fair share?
How does your group plan on realizing responsibility? For example, what are the responsibilities that members will take on in the context of collective work? Who will be the leader? Who will play devil’s advocate to avoid groupthink? Who will be the spokesperson for the group? How does your group plan to make clear to each individual his or her task or role responsibilities?

How does your group plan on implementing the value of reasonableness? How will you guarantee that each individual participates fully in group decisions and activities? How will you deal with the differences, non-agreements, and disagreements that arise within the group? What process will your group use to reach agreement? How will your group insure that every individual has input, that each opinion will be heard and considered, and that each individual will be respected?

How does your group plan on implementing the value of (academic) honesty? For example, how will you avoid cheating or plagiarism? How will you detect plagiarism from group members, and how will you respond to it?

Note: Use your imagination here and be specific on how you plan to realize each value. Think preventively (how you plan on avoiding injustice, irresponsibility, injustice, and dishonesty) and proactively (how you can enhance these values). Don’t be afraid to outline specific commitments. Expect some of your commitments to need reformulation. At the end of the semester, this will help you write the final report. Describe what worked, what did not work, and what you did to fix the latter.

5 Obstacles to Group Work (Developed by Chuck Huff for Good Computing: A Virtue Approach to Computer Ethics)

1. The Abilene Paradox. The story involves a family who would all rather have been at home that ends up having a bad dinner in a lousy restaurant in Abilene, Texas. Each believes the others want to go to Abilene and never questions this by giving their own view that doing so is a bad idea. In the Abilene paradox, the group winds up doing something that no individual wants to do because of a breakdown of intra-group communication.

2. Groupthink. The tendency for very cohesive groups with strong leaders to disregard and defend against information that goes against their plans and beliefs. The group collectively and the members individually remain loyal to the party line while happily marching off the cliff, all the while blaming “them” (i.e., outsiders) for the height and situation of the cliff.

3. Group Polarization. Here, individuals within the group choose to frame their differences as disagreements. Framing a difference as non-agreement leaves open the possibility of working toward agreement by integrating the differences or by developing a more comprehensive standpoint that dialectally synthesizes the differences. Framing a difference as disagreement makes it a zero sum game; one’s particular side is good, all the others bad, and the only resolution is for the good (one’s own position) to win out over the bad (everything else).

4. Note: All of these are instances of a social psychological phenomenon called conformity. But there are other processes at work too, like group identification, self-serving biases, self-esteem enhancement, self-fulfilling prophecies, etc.

Best Practices for Avoiding Abilene Paradox

- At the end of the solution generating process, carry out an anonymous survey asking participants if anything was left out they were reluctant to put before group.
- Designate a Devil’s Advocate charged with criticizing the group’s decision.
- Ask participants to reaffirm group decision—perhaps anonymously.

Best Practices for Avoiding Groupthink (Taken from Janis, 262-271)

- “The leader of a policy-forming group should assign the role of critical evaluator to each member, encouraging the group to give high priority to airing objections and doubts.”
• "The leaders in an organization’s hierarchy, when assigning a policy-planning mission to a group, should be impartial instead of stating preferences and expectations at the outset."
• "Throughout the period when the feasibility and effectiveness of policy alternatives are being surveyed, the policy-making group should from time to time divide into two or more subgroups to meet separately...."
• One or more outside experts or qualified colleagues within the organization who are not core members of the policy-making group should be invited to each meeting ...and should be encouraged to challenge the views of the core members."  
• "At every meeting devoted to evaluating policy alternatives, at least one member should be assigned the role of devil’s advocate."

Best Practices for Avoiding Polarization (Items taken from "Good Computing: A Virtue Approach to Computer Ethics" by Chuck Huff, William Frey and Jose Cruz (Unpublished Manuscript))

• **Set Quotas.** When brainstorming, set a quota and postpone criticism until after quota has been met.
• **Negotiate Interests, not Positions.** Since it is usually easier to integrate basic interests than specific positions, try to frame the problem in terms of interests.
• **Expanding the Pie.** Conflicts that arise from situational constraints can be resolved by pushing back those constraints through negotiation or innovation.
• **Nonspecific Compensation.** One side makes a concession to the other but is compensated for that concession by some other coin.
• **Logrolling.** Each party lowers their aspirations on items that are of less interest to them, thus trading off a concession on a less important item for a concession from the other on a more important item.
• **Cost-Cutting.** One party makes an agreement to reduce its aspirations on a particular thing, and the other party agrees to compensate the party for the specific costs that reduction in aspirations involves.
• **Bridging.** Finding a higher order interest on which both parties agree, and then constructing a solution that serves that agreed-upon interest.

6 Exercise 2 - Avoiding the Pitfalls of Group Work

• Design a plan for avoiding the pitfalls of group work enumerated in the textbox above.
• How does your group plan on avoiding the Abilene Paradox?
• How does your group plan on avoiding Group Polarization?
• How does your group plan on avoiding Groupthink?
• Note: Use imagination and creativity here. Think of specific scenarios where these obstacles may arise, and what your group can do to prevent them or minimize their impact.

7 Exercise 2a: Socio Technical System

Prepare a socio-technical system table for your group to help structure your group self-evaluation. Include hardware/software, physical surroundings, stakeholders (other groups, teacher, other classes, etc.), procedures (realizing values, avoiding pitfalls), university regulations (attendance), and information structures (collecting, sharing, disseminating)

Socio-Technical System Table for Groups

http://cnx.org/content/m13760/1.12/
8 Exercise 3: Prepare a Final, Group Self-Evaluation

- Due Date: One week after the last class of the semester when your group turns in all its materials.
- Length: A minimum of five pages not including Team Member Evaluation Forms
- Contents:
  1. Restate the Ethical and Practical Goals that your group developed at the beginning of its formation.
  2. Provide a careful, documented assessment of your group’s success in meeting these goals. (Don’t just assert that “Our group successfully realized justice in all its activities this semester.” How did your group characterize justice in the context of its work? What specific activities did the group carry out to realize this value? What, among these activities, worked and what did not work?)
  3. Identify obstacles, shortcomings or failures that your group experienced during the semester. How did these arise? Why did they arise? How did you respond to them? Did your response work? What did you learn from this experience?
  4. Assess the plans you set forth in your initial report on how you intended to realize values and avoid pitfalls. How did these work? Did you stick to your plans or did you find it necessary to change or abandon them in the face of challenges?
  5. Discuss your group’s procedures and practices? How did you divide and allocate work tasks? How did you reach consensus on difficult issues? How did you ensure that all members were respected and allowed significant and meaningful participation? What worked and what did not work with respect to these procedures? Will you repeat them in the future? Would you recommend these procedures as best practices to future groups?
  6. What did you learn from your experience working as a team this semester? What will require further reflection and thought? In other words, conclude your self-evaluation with a statement that summarizes your experience working together as a team this semester.

9 Wrap Up: Some further points to consider...

1. Don’t gloss over your work with generalizations like, “Our group was successful and achieved all of its ethical and practical goals this semester.” Provide evidence for success claims. Detail the procedures designed by your group to bring about these results. Are they “best practices”? What makes them best practices?
2. Sometimes—especially if difficulties arose—it is difficult to reflect on your group’s activities for the semester. Make the effort. Schedule a meeting after the end of the semester to finalize this reflection. If things worked well, what can you do to repeat these successes in the future? If things didn’t work out, what can you do to avoid similar problems in the future? Be honest, be descriptive and avoid blame language.
3. This may sound harsh but get used to it. Self-evaluations—group and individual—are an integral part of professional life. They are not easy to carry out, but properly done they help to secure success and avoid future problems.
4. Student groups—perhaps yours—often have problems. This self-evaluation exercise is designed to help you face them rather than push them aside. Look at your goals. Look at the strategies you set forth for avoiding Abilene, groupthink, and group polarization. Can you modify them to deal with problems? Do you need to design new procedures?
10 Ethics of Team Work Presentations

Values in Team Work (Thought Experiments)
[MEDIA OBJECT]¹

Pitfalls to Avoid in Group Work
[MEDIA OBJECT]²

Thought Experiments on Group Work
[MEDIA OBJECT]³

Team Member Evaluation Forms (Required)
[MEDIA OBJECT]⁴

11 Bibliography


¹This media object is a downloadable file. Please view or download it at <http://cnx.org/content/m13760/1.12/Ethics of Team Work.pptx>
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