Is the OSH profession moral or ethical?

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[IOSH](link)'s Head of Advice and Practice Duncan Spencer CFIOSH examines the difference between morals and ethics and their importance for the profession

As a profession, we pride ourselves on being morally upright and ethically focused. We sometimes point at inferior risk controls, claiming them to be unethical. We claim to share a view that enabling people to be injured at work is immoral.

But do we actually understand the difference between ethics and morality? Are they the same thing? Does it matter?

The difference

Our individual sense of morality extends from our upbringing. It reflects the influence of our parents, our religious beliefs, our societal values, in fact, almost anything we have experienced. Morality informs the attitudes we hold and the behaviours we display. Morals are internally held beliefs and personally crafted values.

Ethics are different. They are externally created principles that inform rule creation. Ethics arise from moral understandings or viewpoints. They can impose reasonable obligations (eg we must not rape, kill or steal). But they also include the concept of adhering to virtuous standards such as honesty, integrity, loyalty and compassion as they are interpreted in society.

Should occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals take care to use the words 'moral' and 'ethical' accurately? Our morals lead us to believe in the same ethical principle: workers should not be physically or mentally harmed in the workplace. We also claim to apply ethical standards like honesty, fairness, confidentiality, respect and care. Ethical standards guide our choice of controls and how they are

implemented to keep people safe at work. Standards we all apply in the hope of bringing credit and respect to our profession.

The law

So, what about morals and ethics and how they relate to the law?

Morals in our societies influence the content of our laws, but are laws always ethical? Laws dictate what people must do while ethics indicate what they should do. Both law and ethics seek to regulate human behaviour, but laws try to ensure the right behaviour without necessarily conditioning the internal values of people. It is possible to have a law that can be immoral but reflect the accepted ethics in society at that time (eg western slavery laws of the 18th century).

An action can be moral but against the law (eg crossing a red traffic light to rush an injured person to hospital). This paradox may be one reason why a worker may choose to break the workplace rules and put themselves in danger by dashing into a toxic atmosphere to save a colleague overcome by fumes. Exploring these concepts underscores the importance of aligning individual and business morals under an agreed ethical framework when developing good health and safety cultures.

OSH professionals must understand what is considered moral in society and relate this to the advice provided to keep others safe. To be respected, we must adhere to accepted ethical standards. Failing to do so may undermine the trust we strive for in the workplace and the professional respect we crave from the wider business community. We need to be both moral and ethical.

Find out more

IOSH's Ethical Practice in OSH e-learning and assessment is free to all members and part of our new and enhanced Blueprint package. It provides the latest content on ethical considerations which impact on the profession and the wider business landscape. Chartered Fellows and Chartered Members are required to complete and pass this on an annual basis but we recommend all members take it.