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Editorial

Ethics in solid waste management

Not too long ago I was leaving a country where I had had limited access to world news and in particular news from the United States. My knowledge about world events had been limited to watching an international news program once in a while. The program, although thorough in terms of world-wide coverage did not let me find out what had been happening “back home”. As soon as I reached a major airport, I purchased a few newspapers including some from the USA. As I learned what was going on in Washington and how my favorite football (soccer) teams were performing in Europe, I literally “ran” into an article in *USA Today* that most certainly caught my attention. The article was entitled: Nursing seen as most ethical profession. This article was based on an annual *USA Today/Gallup* poll that was supposed to measure honesty and ethics among 23 occupations in the USA.

As some of you may be aware we, in the United States, are making more and more decisions based on polling and on voting. We are now given the option to decide who is our favorite movie star, are we satisfied with our President’s decision on a particular issue, or which is the best TV show just by simply sending a text message using our mobile phones or by clicking a button on our computer. The title of the article was enough to entice me to read on and, of course, find out if our “occupation” had even been considered. As the title of the article suggests, the occupation that was considered the most ethical one was nursing. According to the poll, more than five out of six Americans (or about 84%) indicated that the standards for nurses are high or very high. In a way I was not surprised by this result. Unfortunately, “waste managers” did not make the list of 23 occupations but engineers did. Engineers were number six, one position above clergy (clergy were number seven!). In case you are interested, US Senators were in position eighteen and US House members in position nineteen. The occupation that was at the bottom of the list (number 23) was car salespersons.

I have never thought of engineers being more honest and ethical than priests in the US but I do know that most of us are trained such that we like order, accuracy, and precision.

I do not, however, remember taking a formal course throughout my entire career on ethics.

The question that immediately came to mind as I read the article was “are we ethical?” followed by “how do we, engineers, learn to practice the basics of ethical behavior?” Based on my experience, the basic principles of ethical behavior come from our upbringing (home and surrounding environment), followed by considerable polishing during our first few years as practicing engineers. Some well-established societies do have a “code of ethics” which generally is mailed to new members.

Ever since the day that I read the results of the poll I have been asking some of my non-engineer friends about ethics and how they perceive ethical behavior. It was interesting to note that many of the people that I asked associate ethical behavior with lying.

As you may have heard me say in some of my presentations: “solid waste management is a dirty business”. Indeed, it is. I have seen how some entities have tried to proliferate rumors just to discredit the competition.

Ethical behavior also is important in publishing. Recently, we have had some manuscripts that have been submitted to more than one journal at the same time. This behavior sometimes is discovered thanks to the efforts of our colleagues in our editorial office and other times due to the active and comprehensive involvement of good reviewers. Reviewing a manuscript takes a lot of time and effort – by the editors, by the reviewers, and by our editorial office – and the submission of manuscripts to different journals by misguided authors is very discouraging and counter productive.

I sincerely hope that people throughout the world do not get pulled into the trend of losing our basic principles and morals, and begin a drive to recover honesty and ethics in all occupations.

Reference

- USA Today*, Nursing Seen as Most Ethical Occupation, Tuesday, December 12, 2006.

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