

Professional Ethics

How Can I Tell the Truth?

By Nick Eastmond and Robert Hayden

Scenario

It was Monday morning for Calvin Hague, Director of Media Services for Thomas Jefferson College in Peoria, Illinois. He sighed as he looked at the memos piled on his desk from problems left behind on Friday.

A major project for the Science and Technology Center was encountering more delays than anyone had anticipated. In a briefing with the President's Council, he had assured both the Council and the National Science Foundation project officer that the computer-based modules were operational. Then he learned from the development team that those modules had not been pilot tested. There was enough concern about their adequacy to argue for a delay in implementing the course nationwide. Rather than being set for distribution, as promised, he found the modules only ready for a trial run. What would he say to the President's Council when it met next Friday?

Last week, as he had attempted to use his computer account to conduct a teleconference with the project officer in Washington, Calvin found that the College's firewall was blocking the transmission of his message. A complaint to the computer services office alerted him that the whole system was experiencing problems. He remembered the office telling him that the firewall had been reconfigured. Later, he found out it was done amateurishly. Calvin knew Pat, the network specialist, had started on a university credential in this area and questioned whether his level of preparation prior to hiring was as advanced as had been claimed.

As Calvin sat musing on this week's impending challenges, he came to see common threads in how people represented things. With people dealing with him in a less than candid way, how was he going to report to the President's Council on what he believed was happening?

Principle

AECT Code of Professional Ethics
Section 2 - Commitment to Society

Principle 2

In fulfilling obligations to society, the member shall represent accurately and truthfully the facts concerning educational matters in direct and indirect public expressions. (Apply the principle to the scenario for yourself before going on to read the analysis.)

Analysis

Calvin Hague is experiencing something that arises when too much optimistic thinking gets played out in the public arena. People using technology are constantly in a hurry. Situations are dynamic, even volatile, as technologies are developed and implemented. There is always competition, and no one wants to be left behind. How do we keep the momentum, but accurately represent our progress?

In the first problem, Calvin was given information that turned out to be inaccurate: the software was not ready for implementation and needed pilot testing first. Were the developers deliberately lying to him? Probably not, but they were possibly guilty of "shading the truth" and

giving an impression of their work being considerably more complete than it was.

In the second problem, Pat's credentials did not match with Calvin's experience which said that the specialist's network abilities were overstated. Having communication fail due to the firewall was no surprise; it was inevitable that Pat's true level of training would become apparent. Maybe it was better to have the deficiency come out sooner, rather than later, because this way it could be fixed sooner.

Both of these situations left Calvin with his own ethical dilemma: How to represent the actual state of affairs to the President's Council and, in turn, when he met with the project officer? He would have the choice of being blunt about previous inaccuracies, or of continuing the misrepresentation. How could he step back and tell the truth?

What would be the consequences of "shading the truth" or of being direct in "calling a spade a spade?" In one case, the developers reported to Calvin administratively; in the other, Pat the network specialist was under a separate organization. Would there be "turf wars"? Denial? Retaliation? Rationalization?

Note: *Professional ethics scenarios published in TechTrends are fictitious (see TechTrends March – April, 2006). There is never any intended resemblance to specific individuals or specific institutions. The instructional purpose of the scenarios is to raise consciousness about AECT's professional ethics.*