

Collegial Ethics: An Overview (4/6/2012)

Introduction

While interactions with our colleagues are essential, there is no training in the topic and collegial interactions sometimes fail, resulting in lack of productivity and unhappiness in the best case, and personal and institutional damage in the worst case. One might say that this training should be included at home and in school in the process of childhood socialization, but this is complex and may be inadequate for all situations. Collegial ethics addresses these issues (Kuhar, 2011). While this description uses many situations in academia, it applies to any group of colleagues in any endeavor.

Definition.

Collegial ethics promotes supporting our colleagues, unless support is not appropriate or suitable. It promotes supportive behavior even if the colleague is in trouble. The word ethics is used because collegial ethics deals with the “principles of conduct governing an individual or group.”

What does support mean?

Most of us instinctively know what being supportive means. Merriam-Webster defines support as: promoting the interests or causes of, upholding or defending as valid or correct, arguing or voting for, or assisting and helping.

Why bother? Do we need collegial ethics?

1. Isn't this just common sense? Well, Voltaire said that common sense is not so common! In spite of the essential and constant occurrence of collegial interactions, little or no formal training specific to this topic is available. Some of the most productive events in the world required close cooperation among diverse kinds of colleagues. One wonders how many have failed because of dysfunction of the groups.
2. Collegial behavior is becoming more and more important in an interactive world. For example, collegiality is often a specific criterion for promotion. Some colleagues, maybe those who are insecure, awkward, or lack communication skills, can especially benefit from studying collegial ethics. Some colleagues may even be anti-collegial and destructive or toxic in some cases – what do we do with them?
3. A focus on and training in collegial ethics will improve our lives and institutions. Most of us mean well in our behavior with colleagues, but we are all victims, to some extent, of the limitations of our evolved human nature and societal norms. Having support is important; we even live longer and healthier (see Ross and Mirowsky, 2002; Fiori et al., 2006; Okabayashi et al., 2004).
4. Much of existing ethical training focuses on finding errors, fraud, faults and failures, and how to be a whistle blower. This can set a tone of suspicion and concern; collegial ethics which focuses on support is needed as a positive counterbalance to this.

5. A focus on collegial ethics enhances our dignity and sometimes the democratic process. It makes us stronger as a group. We become more aware of what is at risk for ourselves when a colleague is attacked.
6. While general ethical training exists, a *focus* on collegial ethics is required to develop this needed field.
7. It is the next logical step in networking which is considered a significant career aid, and will strengthen it.
8. Many precedents demonstrate that collegial ethics is and will be effective. Many individuals have assembled themselves into formal groups for mutual support and advancement. For example, American Women in Science have grouped together and focus on issues of common concern.

Games we play with ourselves.

We can convince ourselves to avoid involvement and *not* to support another. Such self-convincing usually follows recognizable patterns. While there can be truth in these self-convincing rationales, we can also distort the situation in our minds so that we don't have to get involved.

1. We often respond with self righteous judgment. "I'll take care of myself, and he can take care of himself." "She deserves it." "He got himself into it, let him get himself out of it." This may be partly the "shame and blame" concept. If we feel ashamed about what happened to someone, we can banish that feeling of shame by finding a way to blame that person for the problem. Jonathan Haidt, a moral psychologist, sees righteousness as one of the evolved behaviors that keep us in communities, which is part of the reason humans are so successful in surviving and advancing. He points out that while righteousness gives us community, heroism, altruism and sainthood, it also give us war, genocide and conflicting politics (Haidt, 2012).
2. Excessive fairness can be subtle but have a significant effect. Even though it may be clear that a colleague is not being treated fairly, someone may refuse to admit it and even convince him or herself that there must be another side to the story, and they *want to be fair* – so they don't do anything. They can't act... "to be fair...." Or they can express positive opinions to both sides of a problem which can make it worse because then both sides feel like they are right (the "false consensus phenomenon: Ross et al., 1977).
3. It's smart to avoid trouble. "My daddy didn't raise a fool..." There are many who would categorize very supportive colleagues as do-gooders. Many believe that do-gooders can only get in trouble, and some have contempt for do-gooders. Unselfish colleagues are often disliked by coworkers, because they increase expectations of everyone, and some feel that the new standard will make everyone else look bad. Or, unselfish do-gooders may be suspected of having ulterior and selfish motives (<http://wsutoday.wsu.edu/pages/publications.asp?Action=Detail&PublicationID=21047>, accessed on 2/21/2012).

4. I can't endanger my family's future (even though ignoring the situation may degrade their future anyway!). There obviously can be truth in this, but it also can be an easy excuse.
5. Allow a petty *dislike* of someone to overly influence your actions. "I just don't like her." Therefore I won't get involved with her. But liking and disliking should not be the major factor when functioning in the professional world, although practically speaking it does play some role. Liking and disliking should be major factors when we are involved in love relationships and friendships. But in professional relationships, *appropriate* behavior is more important. Obviously, dislike can never justify destructive actions towards another.
6. Genuine paralyzing fear of action is possible. This is not really a game that we play or a self-deception. Its roots may be in an inescapable survival response. What do we do if we find ourselves in this situation?

Evolved Instincts – Importance and Limitations.

We often avoid supporting or helping people for reasons that aren't totally clear to us. They seem to be almost automatic responses. Perhaps we need to look at evolution to explain this, at least partly. We instinctively avoid the ill because we might catch a disease. We instinctively avoid those with odd or aggressive behavior because there may be danger there. We avoid those who are different because we aren't comfortable and don't know what to expect. These instincts are postulated to have evolved in our psyche over millions of years (Kurzban and Leary, 2001; Allen and Babcock, 2003, 2006; Park et al, 2003; Gilbert, 1998). While they are important for our survival, they do not *always* serve us well in the modern world. For example, the ill and crippled can be treated and may have much to offer us and society if we don't turn away too quickly. Understanding our evolution-based/learned responses to each other is a problem of fundamental importance.

Getting involved and being supportive.

1. What does support mean? We often instinctively know what support means, and the dictionary definition of support is given above. It is promoting, or upholding, or defending, or helping. Even people who have done destructive things and break the law can be "supported" by pushing for appropriate, rehabilitative and corrective action.
2. In simple and everyday interactions with colleagues, it costs very little to be supportive. It can be an approving glance or a simple gesture, or it could be an extended conversation over a meal. Developing supportive habits are key.

In the year 2000, a movie entitled *Pay it Forward* with Kevin Spacey and Haley Joel Osment used the phrase "*pay it forward*" as a way to make the world a better place. *Pay it forward* suggests that when we are the recipient of a good deed, then we should do a good deed to others without their asking or especially if they are strangers. What would the reaction be in the workplace if you and your colleagues did this?

3. When confronted with a colleague or situation, *judgment* and common sense are fundamentally very important. We realistically can't be involved in every issue. But, where we could, the key question is "what is an appropriate way to support this colleague in this situation?" It may be simply an everyday pleasantry, or it may be something more complex with much at stake. There are a number of reasonable questions to ask. Should I get involved and why? Just because I'm a decent human being? Because the colleague needs help? Will I be in jeopardy if I get involved? What do I lose if I don't get involved? Does a delivered or contemplated punishment fit the crime?

These and other considerations can help us decide our actions, if any. If a lot is at stake, then discussions with others may be needed if the consequences of action seem unpredictable or endangering. A mature and balanced judgment is needed. We can't be involved in every issue.

4. Sometimes it is clear that we should act, but we are unable. This is where the very important ingredient of *courage* comes into play. It is often the critical and missing factor in many ethical situations. Can we develop it? Sure we can. But, how do we develop it?
5. Developing the skills of supportive collegial actions. This is where the work comes in. These skills, elaborated on below, need to be included in workplace training.
6. Dale Carnegie was an important pioneer in helping people's interactions. In 1936, he wrote a book entitled "How to win friends and influence people". Some very powerful and successful people have been influenced by Carnegie. It is said that Warren Buffett, the financier, studied and practiced Dale Carnegie's ideas.

Carnegie's ideas overlap with collegial ethics. For example, he suggests: genuinely appreciating others, trying to see things from their point of view, praising improvements of others, encouraging and making it seem that the problem is easy to correct. *If you talk about a person, then attribute a fine reputation to the person – so that he will have one to live up to.*

But collegial ethics may be different in a key way. How to win friends and influence people is primarily another way of increasing your personal power. For example, The benefits include increasing your popularity, winning people to your way of thinking, making you a better salesman, etc.. But, collegial ethics primarily has the colleague's best interest in mind. Collegial ethics is sincerely for the other person's sake. Colleagues may resent your actions if they think you are out to advance your own agenda. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How to Win Friends and Influence People](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_to_Win_Friends_and_Influence_People), accessed on Feb 20, 2012).

Collegial Skills. Courses and practices

So much for talking about collegial ethics. Talking is nice, but *how do we actually implement it*. This is a vitally important part of the story. There is probably not a single answer or method, but we can look at other ethics training programs and see how they trained their groups. What skills did they focus on, and how did they teach their skills?

A reasonable way to teach collegial ethics is: a) developing courses, b) honing skills by role playing and practice, c) study of general principles, d) study of and discussion of specific cases or situations, e) discussion of related current events, f) mentoring, g) putting principles into action and then critiquing, rethinking, re-planning and trying new actions. This general

approach has been effective (for example see: <http://www.uth.tmc.edu/orsc/training/ResearchMisconduct/index.htm>, accessed on March w21, 2012).

While it is not a complete list, here are some of the skills and principles that collegial ethics promotes.

1. Practice being positive and uplifting to others.

This is often very simple and fun. Consider Dr Luckie who is nominated by a colleague for a teaching award; he wins it and is surprised because he never won recognition before, even though he has been thought of as an excellent teacher. Dr Luckie wants to amplify good will and he does so in various ways. He praises a lecturer, who is being criticized, for the positive parts of his presentation. He, good naturedly and with a smile, volunteers to help another professor run a demonstration for students. He brings sweets to the administrative staff in the department and tells them where they did a good job.

2. Develop a supportive and/or neutral language.

Language is one of the most powerful tools we have and certainly accounts for much of the evolutionary success of our species. Language can do many things; it has the power to heal and calm, or to inflame and anger. Many groups recognize the power of language and have sought to mold it (for example, The Institute for nonviolent communication). We have seen many effects of language, haven't we? It isn't surprising that language is one of the most important tools for collegial support.

One of the things needed is the development of a supportive or at least neutral style of talking to or about colleagues. The following case exemplifies this.

"A colleague has come under investigation regarding expenditures of his grant funds. He has a flawless track record and this has surprised everyone. A group of faculty in the dining hall are discussing this (the colleague under investigation is not there).

"Hey Fred, you know this guy best, what did he do?"

Fred replies, "I have no idea."

Someone else says "He must have done something to get investigated."

"Yeah, didn't he get a new car recently?" and everyone laughs at the intended humor.

"He hasn't shown his face lately."

"Yeah, sounds like guilty behavior to me."

"I'm going to stay away from him or else I might get investigated." There are a few serious nods and introspective faces around the table.

Now consider this alternative conversation.

"Hey Fred, you know this guy the best, what is happening?"

"I'm not sure. The alleged charges are being investigated, so I don't know. Maybe he did something bad. But, it could be a misunderstanding or maybe something minor. I've seen that before."

"Where's he been? We haven't seen him."

"I think he feels bad and maybe he's ashamed because of the investigation. But I think I'll give him a call and invite him to join us one of these days. Not so we can grill him, but so he can explain if he wants to. If he has made a mistake, then I'd like to learn from it."

It's obvious which conversation is more supportive. Does competition in the workplace – a positive force in many ways – set us up to be harsh to others? Probably so. Does human nature want us to deflate others in a self-aggrandizing way, and even to enjoy their misfortune (schadenfreude)? Perhaps yes. But again, our learned and natural tendencies may not always be appropriate or just in every situation. “ (from Kuhar MJ. 2011.)

3. Apply the golden rule. The golden rule of treating others as we want to be treated goes back to at least the 7th century BCE (Runes, DD. 1959). It is found perhaps in all cultures

4. Develop conflict resolution skills.

There is some conflict in all of our lives. Some of us just hate conflict and some of us do ok with it. One of the general terms associated with facilitating a peaceful ending of social conflict is conflict resolution. Conflict is both normal and necessary, and while avoiding it is also normal, we need to resolve conflicts. This is a powerful intercollegial skill that has been given much thought by many (Forsyth, D. R. 2009; Goldfien, J. H., & Robbennolt, J. K. 2007; Van de Vliert, E., & Euwema, M. C. 1994). Training programs also exist.

In conflict resolution, one searches for a win-win solution, a solution where all parties gain something. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict_resolution, accessed on 3/14/2012)

5. Practice “First do no harm” or minimize harm.

Another useful guideline in dealing with colleagues derives from the Hippocratic Oath – first do no harm, or, perhaps a more realistic goal is to *minimize harm*. Consider the following fictitious case.

A new faculty member, Dr Sharpe, is in a kind of trouble. He is outstanding in many ways: he is very successful, comes from a high powered University, and is a recent “trophy” hire. But, many of the other faculty members are critical of him, perhaps because he has been critical of their productivity (It turns out that his boss, the Director, has been critical of the same faculty members). They are beginning to harp on his flaws, and negative rumors that he is overly judgmental and hostile are becoming vicious, even though there is little evidence to support the rumors. Even though Sharpe has denied the truth of the rumors, they have hurt Sharpe’s reputation, and invitations for seminars and lectures have fallen off significantly. Dr Sharpe has asked for support from colleagues and superiors, but it has not helped. Some members of the faculty and the administration think it would be best if he left the school.

The Director who hired Dr Sharpe is somewhat overwhelmed by the trouble, and is unsure of what he should do. He does not think the rumors about his new hire are true, but he will not even admit that rumors exist when Sharpe asks about them. Nonetheless, it is clear to Sharpe that there are problems, perhaps serious ones. He repeatedly goes to his Director for help and clarification without really getting any.

The Director, who is new and not very experienced himself, has been thinking about his options. He has been urged by his superiors to find the courage to do *something*.

- a.) The Director can ask Dr Sharpe to leave. Maybe he can even dig into his past and reframe earlier problems in a negative way so that Sharpe is too embarrassed to stay. This seems easy, allows the Director to largely ignore the problem, and shifts the burden to Dr Sharpe to get out of the way. But some of his friends, more experienced administrators, point out that this will be harmful to Sharpe because it will appear to outsiders that he could not be defended, and was undesirable.
- b.) He can try to get another department or school interested in Sharpe. The Director knows many department heads throughout the country and is considering calling them to say that Sharpe is "available" for hire. He actually does this with one other chair, but is met with suspicion and a blunt "no." The other chair has heard about the rumors and wants to know if they are true and if Sharpe is in real trouble. He asks if the Director is trying to pass on his problem to someone else. The Director begins to realize that he may be hurting Sharpe by taking this option.
- c.) The Director can explain the situation to Dr Sharpe and work with him and his opponents towards a solution. This will take time and effort, but will show that he has faith in Sharpe, and that Sharpe still has value. But it will also mean that he may have to stand up against those who want Sharpe out of the school. The Director decides to announce that he plans to discuss this with Sharpe, find out the facts, and bring in professional helpers, if needed, to resolve the situation to everyone's satisfaction as best he can. Even though the Director may be in some peril with this option, he feels that it is his responsibility.

The last option is obviously the collegial solution. Even though he may end up investigating Dr Sharpe for bad behavior, it does give Sharpe the dignity and due process he deserves. It may be that Sharpe will decide to leave anyway, or perhaps everyone will be satisfied by a to-be-discovered solution. The Director is to be congratulated in that he chose to avoid the solutions that were easy but actually did harm to Dr Sharpe. The guideline of doing no harm or minimizing harm may be especially useful when, for one reason or another, we don't know the facts and cannot easily discover them. You may say, with some validity, that life is not so simple. No matter what we do we may harm someone in some way. If a situation does involve some harm no matter what, then minimizing harm is obviously the goal.

6. Mentor others in collegial ethics.

Mentoring is a holy process and a gift. Sadly, it is not always available or wanted. But like any element of our culture, collegial ethics will become embedded if mentoring and living the process of collegial ethics is done to a great enough degree and for a long enough time. This has happened before with other issues.

Limits of collegial ethics

1. It's not for unworthy colleagues.

What is an “unworthy” colleague? They are in the extreme, and one thinks of abhorrent criminals or someone who can’t function in a group of any kind. They require more serious interventions. A less extreme group might be those who use but distort collegial ethics and use it only to manipulate others to achieve their own personal ends. Sociopathic individuals are found at every level of society.

2. How do we handle uninterested colleagues?

Perhaps with mentoring, acting as a role model, patience and hope. Not everyone will be able to be generous to others, although most will be. Converting others may be a significant challenge in some cases. This seems to be an important issue. While we can’t do it all ourselves, each of us can do a lot, and we may have to be satisfied with that for much of the time.

3. Access to training in collegial ethics could be a problem.

There are likely to be many who have not been exposed to collegial ethics. But with electronic communications and personal teaching and training, that can be remedied. Including young colleagues will be important to give the collegial ethics culture a long life and growth.

Summary.

Collegial ethics promotes supportive interactions with colleagues. A focus on this is needed because there is little or no training in it, it is needed as a positive counterbalance to “accusative” ethics, and it will improve our lives. It recommends a thorough personal inventory so that our motives in collegial situations are clear to us. Our evolved instincts and automatic responses have been needed for survival, but they do not always produce the best results in the long run. Careful judgment of colleagues and their situations is needed; sometimes support is not appropriate. Many of the skills of collegial ethics have already been developed and can easily be recast in this new light. These include developing a supportive language, conflict resolution skills and minimizing harm. Development of training programs and mentoring others, particularly younger colleagues, in collegial ethics is essential.

Citations

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