
ETHICS AND FORENSICS: THERE IS A NEED

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It has been fairly well established that the decade of the '80s is a very competitive one. We are bombarded daily with competition for our attention, for our affection, for our time, and for our dollars. As a result, it becomes increasingly important for us to be able to intelligently make decisions, and to make them quickly. Sometimes there is time to ponder alternatives and to consider options. Often, however, that time is not available. At those moments, it is important to be able to draw upon a broad-based background of information to assist us in the decision-making process. That background information will ultimately come to all of us, if we survive long enough. For our students, however, it may be more important that they are able to develop decision-making skills fairly quickly. Coaches and teachers can play an important part in the development of those skills.

In examining the development of decision-making skills, it may be useful to reflect on the basis upon which many decisions are made. In nearly any field, eventually the question arises about ethical considerations. At this juncture, it may prove pointless to discuss a definition for ethics: many abound. It may be more beneficial, to consider the existence of the concept of ethics in the field of forensics. Several questions may then arise.

Is there ethics in forensics? Probably there is. At any rate, we expect ethical practices and behaviors to exist. We know they do for us, so we assume they exist for everyone.

Does ethical behavior exist specifically for forensics? Probably most of us expect that ethical behavior exists in life, and for life. We presume there is life beyond forensics, and that ethical behavior will exist in that life.

And then, the nasty question of a definition crops up. That is ethics, or ethical behavior? Unfortunately, too many of us may be able to give a lengthy list of what ethical behavior is not. The list of what ethical behavior is may be more difficult to compile. For the sake of discussion, let us consider that ethical behavior is most likely a variation of the Golden Rule. We expect others to behave ethically toward us. They should be able to expect us to behave ethically toward them. Ethics is a way of life, an attitude that should be exhibited constantly and consistently, not just when it is convenient.

For those of us who have been teaching and coaching for several years, it may be a little difficult to determine when, where or why certain ideas and attitudes developed. For some of us, it may have been the result of a class in our undergraduate or graduate programs. It may have been a workshop, a conference, or an internship. For others, the impetus may have been from a particular teacher, an advisor, a parent, or a close friend. For most of us, there probably was a combination of several of these factors. Katherine Nelligan insisted on her students providing their best, always. My Aunt Helen encouraged expanding horizons and trying new and different experiences. My parents encouraged participation and fulfilling leadership roles whenever possible. This kind of education did not come from textbooks or classes. Instead, the lessons were learned daily and monthly, not so much by word but by deed. Many of us learned from example, from watching and absorbing. Of course there were the words of encouragement and instruction, but perhaps the most lasting impressions were created by what we saw and experienced. In many cases, what some of us experienced was a living example of role-modeling, of "Do as I do."

At times, it seems, we are so caught up in the competition of life in the '80s that little or no attention is paid to what helps us to be competitive and maintain that competitive edge. In the musical "Fiddler on the Roof," the Russian peasants tell us that they do what they do because they have always done it that way. It's their "tradition." A more modern answer to the question "Why?" may simply be, "Because." The detailed explanation would be an education in itself. The answer may be less important than knowing how, to provide the answer. The answer to the question may be the key to a true and lasting education for everyone. It may be time to abandon the frequently uttered admonition, "Do as I say, not as I do." While it is usually used in fun, for many students it may become a fact of life. As many of our students watch their teachers in action, how many of them see role-models for actions that

they do not respect? And for how many of them is it important that they develop that respect? We can easily see that there are ethical considerations that face all of us daily. These considerations exist not only in the field of forensics and education, but in life as well. For those of us who are on the teaching side of the classroom, the need for attention to those ethical considerations may require some additional attention from us.

There probably is not a forensics coach anywhere who has not been in the position of making a decision about how far one should go in helping a student. Classroom teachers are faced with a similar decision, as are advisors and committee chairs. But in the realm of coaching, the decision seems to carry particular interest and importance for many of us. Bearing in mind that this is an age of competition, when a student wants to be coached "to win", just how far do we go? Do we tell the student exactly what to do in order to "win"? Or do we take the sometimes unpopular approach and help the student to discover the most effective methods for him/her to be an effective communicator? Certainly it would seem that the latter approach is the "best." However, it may also be the slower and the more frustrating method. And when students and coaches alike are faced with the terrible pressure to win, to do well, time is an extremely valuable commodity. For many people, the sense of winning needs to be almost instantaneous. Patience seems to be a rare virtue, certainly on the part of many students. And when a coach is faced with a funding body who wants instant and tangible results, and with a department head who does not appreciate or understand absences from campus, and with colleagues who seem to have little or no appreciation for the hours devoted to coaching, it is hard for the coach to develop patience and to follow the educationally sound path and help the student to "discover."

Allowing, or "helping," a student to discover can be a time-consuming, sometimes frustrating, often irritating, but always rewarding and satisfying experience. It is no secret that frustration can occur quickly, especially after a long day. It can be an irritating experience to have to tell a student repeatedly how to construct an argument or explain a point. But there is very little that is more satisfying or rewarding than the moment when the student says, "Oh, I understand!" The psychologists may call it the "Aha Experience", but most teachers may call it the "At Last!" moment. For everyone, it is a moment of genuine pleasure. Of course it is also a great relief to know that the hours or days of work have finally paid off, and to know that progress can now be made toward completing the project at hand. It is at this moment that the educator/coach needs an abundance of patience. The temptation is great to tell the student too quickly what the best words are to use, or the most effective illustration to insert. At this moment, it is important to refrain, to wait just a little longer.

In "Our Town", Thornton Wilder pointed out that children need to make

some mistakes of their own and to experience some difficult times of their own so that they can truly appreciate the better times that will surely come along. At the moment of enlightenment, a coach needs to be prepared to allow the student to proceed at her/his own pace, to make decisions independently. There is no question that that is a difficult position to take, especially since the coach may be able to anticipate how an audience will respond. The value of the learning experience will be greater, however, if the student has the opportunity to follow through a train of thought or a line of reasoning. The practiced coach who has been instilling patience in the student can then help the student to determine the best of several alternatives, to learn why audiences did not respond as the student had hoped.

Those who served as role models for many of us did so over a long period of time. We were able to observe their actions and reactions, to learn from their comments and responses. We are now in a position to provide our students with the same kinds of opportunities, if we and our students can be patient enough for time to pass and for the experiences to unfold. But it takes time, and as coaches we need to be ever mindful that our students are ever watchful. They may no longer exhibit the pre-school kind of adoration that elementary children frequently display, but the watchful attitude remains just the same. Many of us have been in the somewhat frightening situation when a former student says, "I remember how you used to...." That experience is a powerful reminder of what educators tell us: What we really teach is ourselves.

It is a little overwhelming to realize that our sense of values and ethics may well become our students' sense of ethics. Since we expect our students to exhibit good ethical behavior, we need to be prepared to show them good ethical behavior.

What, then, is the benefit of good ethical behavior? Fortunately, there are many benefits. There will be a sense of pride in seeing a project completed and knowing that it is one's own work, not a repeat of someone else's work. There will be a sense of accomplishment, of knowing that an individual is capable of completing a body of work. There will be an attitude of dignity and self-worth, an invaluable cornerstone in maintaining the quality of life to which we have become accustomed.