

# Actualités

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### What are you going to do? A framework for professionally responsible decision-making

Over the last fifteen years, the world has seen numerous examples of individual and group decision-making in organizational settings that have led to significant negative financial and reputational consequences for those involved. Whether we review decisions made by individuals at Enron, WorldCom, Satyam or Parmalat or decisions made by groups of people about tax avoidance, financial risk-taking, insider trading, or the location for international sports competitions, we can find many examples of those who have not lived up to their professional responsibilities. Corporate leaders, accountants, lawyers, elected and appointed officials as well as coaches, athletes, and international sports associations are subject to pressures from power or the promise of rewards following responsiveness to power. The consequences of professionally irresponsible decision-making are varied: organizations disappear, shareholders lose investments, and employees have no pensions while individuals go to jail, are fired, or otherwise lose their positions. In all cases, there is significant damage to reputation.

What can change this seemingly endless cycle of conduct? After reflecting on the pervasiveness of so many to live up to their fundamental professional responsibilities, the Center for Professional Responsibility in Business and Society was established at the University of Illinois to inspire new dimensions in decision-making through active engagement with the concept of professional responsibility. Education about professional responsibility, along with repeated decision-making practice, will give common concepts to those who care about advancing the conversation or professionally responsible behavior in any setting.

What is “professional responsibility”? It has three parts: professional identity, professional standards, and professional judgment.

The first element of professional identity asks the baseline question, “Who am I?”. This reflection challenges individuals to define their personal and professional values and to determine how they will demonstrate those values in a profession and a workplace.

The second element of professional responsibility raises another question, “What guidance will help me become the best professional I can be?”. This question assumes there are available resources to help guide decision-making in difficult dilemmas and prompts individuals to probe professional standards to find the guidance that will help them to become responsible professionals in their chosen fields. This aspect of professional responsibility urges individuals to fully understand the expectations, standards, and rules of any organization or profession with which they choose to be affiliated. Once individuals are committed to comply with and live up to those expectations, this element encourages exploration of the many ways individuals can develop and sustain professional relationships with like-minded professionals who are equally committed to exhibiting the highest standards in their work.

The third element of professional responsibility is “Professional Judgment” and poses perhaps the most difficult question—“What will I do?”. An individual’s personal behaviors and decisions reflect accumulated knowledge and skills as well as fundamental personal values. Knowing your own limits and being able to act when they are reached is a demonstration of an individual’s well-practiced decision-making process. This last element requires backbone, confidence and practice, which we call “professional responsibility muscle”. This muscle, when

developed, can be used whenever a challenging decision presents itself. Those who help their organizations make decisions in a manner that effectively balances their individual professional responsibilities with the needs and societal responsibilities of the organization will fully implement professionally responsible decision-making. The Center for Professional Responsibility uses this three-pronged concept to construct classes and extra-curricular activities for students, to convene interactive conferences for faculty and businesses, and to engage a wide range of organizations in conversations about the positive, long-term impact of a commitment to professionally responsible decision-making. Professors believe that young people can be positively influenced by early and repeated introduction to the concepts and practice of professional responsibility. Organizational leaders share positive examples of professionally responsible decision-making and agree that these examples should be highlighted with frequency. Company recruiters recognize and value incoming talent that understands and commits to exercising professional responsibility in decision-making. This comprehensive educational approach will drive common decision-making language and methods, and, in time, this familiarity with the language of professional responsibility will ensure that organizational decisions will give full consideration to the ethical dimension, no matter what the setting.

**Gretchen A. Winter, J.D.**

executive director, Center for Professional Responsibility in Business and Society, College of Business, adjunct professor of Law, College of Law, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, visiting professor, Université de Cergy-Pontoise