

ETHICS BEYOND COMPLIANCE

The moral responsibility of the occupational health and safety professional

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What you will leave with

01 Distinguish a legal requirement from an ethical judgment.

02 Evaluate competing duties using a repeatable decision process.

03 Communicate risk and protect worker voice under pressure.

04 Choose one action to strengthen your own practice.

Would you sign it?

A process meets the applicable limit in one sample.
Workers report symptoms during a different task.

Leadership asks: “Can you say the operation is safe?”

YOUR DECISION

A Sign off

B Refuse

**C Qualify the
finding and act**

Our responsibility travels across the county

Defense, maritime & aerospace

Bayfront, bases, maintenance

Life sciences & healthcare

Research corridors, hospitals

Manufacturing & technology

Production, labs, service work

Construction, hospitality & logistics

Sites, hotels, distribution

Agriculture & food processing

North County, fields, plants

Compliance sets requirements. Ethics guides judgment.

COMPLIANCE

What must we do under the applicable rules?

ETHICS

What should we do with what we know?

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Meet requirements and address foreseeable harm.

Four lenses for one difficult decision

01 DUTY | What obligations and promises must we honor?

02 CONSEQUENCES | Who could be harmed, and how seriously?

03 FAIRNESS | Who receives the benefit and carries the risk?

04 CARE & CHARACTER | What would honest, respectful leadership do?

Professional integrity has observable behaviors

01 Be candid about evidence, uncertainty, and limits of competence.

02 Disclose interests that could influence your judgment.

03 Communicate unacceptable risk to appropriate parties.

04 Protect confidential information and treat people fairly.

Who benefits? Who bears the risk?

01 Executives may gain schedule, revenue, or performance credit.

02 Workers may carry injury, illness, wage loss, or delayed disease.

03 Contractors, temporary staff, and night shifts can be overlooked.

04 Include affected workers before accepting a residual risk.

The phrases that should make us pause

“We have always done it this way.”

“Nothing happened last time.”

“Just soften that finding.”

“The contractor is responsible.”

Design protection into the work

Eliminate

Remove the hazardous task or source.

Substitute

Compare a safer process and its new risks.

Engineer

Enclose, isolate, ventilate, or guard.

Administer

Plan work, staffing, access, and recovery.

PPE

Select, fit, maintain, and support correct use.

Invisible exposure deserves visible action

Characterize the task, substance, duration, and exposed groups.

Explain what sampling establishes and what it does not.

Investigate symptoms and changing operating conditions.

Use interim protection while qualified assessment proceeds.



AI-generated conceptual illustration

Case 1: The shipyard deadline

A contractor crew will perform hot work in a restricted space.

Ventilation verification and a required pre-entry check are incomplete.

A manager says the delay will miss a vessel milestone.

YOUR DECISION

What do you do in the next 15 minutes?

Case 1: Make the restart defensible

01

Protect

Pause the affected task and control access.

02

Verify

Use qualified people to confirm necessary safeguards.

03

Coordinate

Align host, contractor, and simultaneous work.

04

Resume

Define authorization, evidence, and recheck triggers.

Biotech & healthcare: protect the helper

Life sciences | Novel materials, containment, lab changes, maintenance

Healthcare | Patient handling, exposure, fatigue, workplace violence

Ethical tension | Mission urgency can overshadow worker protection.

Action | Verify controls and involve the people performing the task.



AI-generated conceptual illustration

Construction: a signature is not understanding

01 Pressure | Tight schedules, subcontractor handoffs, changing sites

02 Concern | Training was delivered; safe performance is unverified.

03 Action | Demonstration, understandable communication, and field checks

04 Question | Can every affected worker explain how to stop unsafe work?

Manufacturing & tech: do not transfer the hazard

01 Machine or maintenance work | Isolation, guarding, access, stored energy

02 Advanced processes | Solvents, particulates, lasers, electrical hazards

03 Ethical tension | A faster workaround becomes the normal method.

04 Action | Redesign the task and verify every exposed group.

Hospitality, logistics & agriculture: hear every shift

01 Hotels & kitchens | Ergonomics, chemicals, heat, lone work

02 Warehousing & distribution | Vehicle separation, pace, fatigue

03 North County agriculture & food | Heat, pesticides, machinery

04 Action | Observe nights, seasonal work, and contractor tasks.

Case 2: “The thermometer is only at 84°.”

An indoor food-processing worker reports dizziness at 84°F.

Humidity, exertion, and radiant heat have not been evaluated.

A supervisor says controls are unnecessary until 87°F.

YOUR DECISION

**What is required?
What is ethically
necessary right
now?**

Reporting is a test of trust

01 Thank the worker and make the immediate situation safe.

02 Provide a channel that is usable across shifts and employers.

03 Follow up with the person who raised the concern.

04 Watch for retaliation, ridicule, or lost opportunities.

Metrics must describe the work honestly

01 A low injury rate cannot, by itself, prove strong controls.

02 Show findings, sampling limitations, and unresolved actions.

03 Track verified critical controls and reporting follow-through.

04 Reward useful learning without discouraging injury reports.

A practical decision process: P.R.O.T.E.C.T.

P People

Identify everyone who could be affected.

R Risk

Establish severity, likelihood, and uncertainty.

O Obligations

Check rules, professional duties, and promises.

T Tradeoffs

Compare controls, fairness, and feasible alternatives.

E Escalate

Protect now; bring the issue to the right authority.

C Communicate

Record the decision, owners, and restart conditions.

T Test

Verify performance and reopen the decision when needed.

Say the difficult thing clearly

“Here is the finding and who is exposed.”

“Here is what the evidence establishes—and what remains uncertain.”

“I recommend this protection now and this verification next.”

“These are the conditions for resuming or continuing the task.”

When the concern is dismissed

01 Protect people immediately when the hazard demands it.

02 Document facts, advice, decisions, and unresolved exposure.

03 Use operations, EHS, executive, ethics, and specialist channels.

04 If risk persists, consider appropriate external or legal channels.

Competence, confidentiality & conflicts

01 Competence | Bring in the specialist before making the claim.

02 Confidentiality | Share the minimum appropriate sensitive information.

03 Conflicts | Disclose interests before recommending a vendor.

04 AI | Verify outputs; protect data; retain human accountability.

Build a culture that supports ethical action

01 Week 1 | Listen to an overlooked shift or contractor group.

02 Week 2 | Verify one critical control where the work occurs.

03 Week 3 | Review one unresolved finding and its decision owner.

04 Week 4 | Tell workers what changed and evaluate effectiveness.

What do people experience because you are there?

Bring one difficult decision. Keep names and confidential details private.

What evidence do we need? Who is carrying the risk?

What action would protect people and preserve integrity?



Building a culture of safety excellence, with you. For you.

Sources & further reading 1/2

- S1** San Diego Regional EDC — About the Region / key industries
<https://www.sandiegobusiness.org/about-the-region/>
- S2** American Society of Safety Professionals — Code of Professional Conduct (approved January 2024)
<https://www.assp.org/about/society-bylaws-and-guidelines/code-of-conduct>
- S3** CDC / NIOSH — Hierarchy of Controls
<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/hierarchy-of-controls/about/index.html>
- S4** California DIR — Title 8, §3203: Injury and Illness Prevention Program
<https://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/3203.html>
- S5** California DIR — Title 8, §3396: Indoor Heat Illness Prevention
<https://www.dir.ca.gov/Title8/3396.html>

Sources checked October 6, 2026. Cases and PROTECT are presenter-developed teaching tools.

Sources & further reading 2/2

- S6** OSHA — Worker Participation
<https://www.osha.gov/safeandsound/safety-and-health-programs/worker-participation>
- S7** California DIR — Cal/OSHA Jurisdiction
<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/calosha-jurisdiction.html>
- S8** San Diego County — Agriculture, Weights & Measures
<https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/awm/>
- S9** OSHA — Incentive-program interpretation, October 11, 2018
<https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/standardinterpretations/2018-10-11>

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