

Practicing Professional Ethics More Than a Trend - It's a Way of Life

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by Cindy Jensen

The issue of ethics is a hot topic in all aspects of life, including business, medicine, religion, education and sports - even skating. Ethics help to define a code of conduct whereby individuals can relate to one another effectively. Without a code of conduct, or moral compass, society is dysfunctional. Civilizations, governments and organizations throughout history have provided "codes of conduct": the Ten Commandments, the golden rule, the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights and, yes, the PSA Code of Ethics.

All of these and many more are well-intentioned documents, but the words that make up the rules are meaningless unless they become internalized. How can we ascribe to a moral code of behavior without making that code a way of life? The root meaning of the word moral implies such a requirement. As skating professionals, we are educators and, as such, we are role models with a responsibility to our colleagues, our students and the integrity of our sport.

Ethics, while universal in concept, really begin with the individual. I often say to my students: "Trust yourself. Be patient with yourself. Be true to yourself. Respect yourself." These are by no means trite phrases. What I'm really saying is that to be successful we must first begin with the self. Certainly genetics, environment and circumstances play a role in who we are, but the choices and decisions we make to respond to our environment and circumstances give direction to our lives, shape our conduct and define our public persona. Those choices and decisions come from the person within.

Having a road map, a code of conduct, and positive role models along the way - parents, teachers, counselors, youth group leaders, employers and coaches - can serve as a beneficial "traffic patrol" as we steer our course through life. Ideally, when we become adults, the life lessons we've learned equip us to be socially and professionally adept - caring, self-directed and responsible participants in life. What an opportunity we have as skating professionals to affect the lives of young people by attending to our professional ethics!

As skating professionals, we can look to the PSA Code of Conduct as a practical guide for conducting our skating business. But it is a guide that really begins with self-respect - having the personal pride to put forth our best image in the way we conduct our business, relate to our coaching colleagues and communicate with our clients. It is about personal growth and development as we continue in our professional training. It is about careful consideration of our coaching colleagues as we practice what is fair, honorable, helpful and encouraging for all individuals in the work environment. It is no small thing to truly practice the principle of treating others as you wish to be treated.

When was the last time you reviewed the PSA Code of Ethics? Give yourself an honest appraisal based on those principles. It begins with each of us as individuals. Good manners, fair play, honesty and consideration are all qualities that are infectious when practiced. Our work environment becomes a happier place. Our coaching business is more successful. Our facility's business thrives. We elevate the sport we love and the profession that sustains it. Simply put, professional ethics are just good business.

How then do we, as professionals, give practical application to a code of ethics? We must be proactive to protect our professional stature. Practicing ethical behavior means being conscious of

and conscientious about our personal conduct in relation to others. Consider these aspects of human relationships:

1. Think first. Begin by thinking about the situation or individuals involved before speaking or acting. Being thoughtful makes for more sensitive and appropriate responses.
2. Speak responsibly. Make it a policy to refrain from inappropriate language. Avoid gossip, which often becomes destructive or causes confusion and certainly wastes time. Disparaging comments made about professional colleagues or clients are damaging to the subject and risk placing you in an unprofessional light. Remember, what you say almost always comes back to haunt you and seldom to hail you.
3. Respond wisely. Always provide a response, but it is not necessary to rush to an answer. Know your resources. It is OK to seek a better answer or simply to find the best answer. Sometimes we need to take a breath before we reply. Be confident in your response, even when it is not what the recipient wants to hear. Be a good listener, as well. Listening is a critical part of the communication equation. It can serve to improve or clarify our responses. Respond to your messages in a timely fashion; it is rude not to do so.
4. Relate appropriately. In relating to students and clients it is important to maintain the student/coach rapport. Young people do not learn respect unless they are treated with respect. Understand appropriate physical contact. Have conversations in the company of an objective witness. Be visible in all your associations with students. Understand the ramifications of transporting students to competitions and test sessions. If this is necessary, be sure your personal insurance is in order and that you have complete medical release forms for students. Coaches are not buddies. A coach can be a friend, but only as a significant, influential adult in a young person's life.
5. Present graciously. Our personal presentation and image speaks volumes about our professionalism. In addition to professional attire when teaching and at test sessions and competitions, consider also your respect for your colleagues and clients. Friends and family who are non-skating professionals do not belong at your side when you are conducting your business. You have worked hard to develop your professional stature. Stand on your own, confident and capable.

This pragmatic approach to practicing professional ethics will not only make your work more enjoyable, it will ensure your good business.

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