Maryland Engineering Ethics: Lessons from Board Disciplinary Actions

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Engineering is more than calculations and designs. It is a licensed profession grounded in protecting public health, safety, and welfare. In Maryland and across the United States, professional engineers (PEs) must adhere to laws, rules, and ethical standards that govern their work.

Failure to comply with these requirements can lead to formal disciplinary action by the State Board of Registration for Professional Engineers. These actions are not just administrative—they carry real consequences for careers, reputations, and public trust.

This course explores real-world disciplinary cases, explains common violations, and provides practical guidance on how engineers can maintain the highest ethical and professional standards.

1.2 Learning Objectives

By completing this course, participants will be able to:

- Describe the role of professional ethics in engineering practice.
- Identify common types of violations that lead to disciplinary action.
- Explain the disciplinary process used by state engineering boards.
- Analyze real disciplinary cases for lessons learned.
- Apply best practices to maintain compliance and ethical integrity.
- Understand state-specific rules and board approaches to discipline.

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2.0 Why Ethics Matters in Engineering

2.1 Engineering Is a Profession

Engineering is a profession defined not only by technical skill but by a commitment to public service and ethical conduct. Every licensed engineer holds a legal and moral obligation to protect the safety, health, and welfare of the public.

This duty is reflected in engineering laws, rules of professional conduct, and ethics codes adopted nationwide. Boards of engineering licensure in each state oversee compliance with these rules, investigate complaints, and discipline engineers who violate them.

Ethics is not an abstract ideal. It guides daily decisions—choosing honesty over convenience, ensuring quality over speed, and maintaining transparency even under pressure. A lapse in ethics can have serious consequences, from legal liability to harm to the public.

2.1 The Engineer's Duty: Protecting the Public

Professional engineers are trusted because of their specialized knowledge. This trust carries with it the duty to:

- Prioritize public safety over personal or employer interests.
- Communicate truthfully with clients and the public.
- Avoid deceptive or fraudulent practices.
- Maintain competence through continuing education.
- Uphold the honor and dignity of the profession.

When these duties are neglected or violated, the risk to public safety can be significant. That is why state engineering boards enforce strict standards.

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3.0 Common Types of Ethical Violations

Across the country, engineering boards encounter recurring types of professional misconduct. Understanding these categories helps engineers recognize and avoid risky behaviors.

3.1 Failure to Maintain Continuing Education

Many states require PEs to complete and document a certain number of Professional Development Hours (PDH) every renewal cycle. In Maryland, this requirement ensures engineers stay up to date with evolving practices, technologies, and safety standards.

Common violations include:

- Failing to complete the required hours before license renewal.
- Falsely certifying completion of PDH.
- Ignoring or failing to respond to a Board audit of continuing education records.

Such failures may appear minor but are taken seriously as they reflect on an engineer's commitment to ongoing competence.

3.2 Practicing Without Proper Licensure

Operating without a valid license is a clear violation of law. This can occur when:

- An engineer fails to renew their license on time but continues offering services.
- A firm operates in a state without the required business authorization.
- A professional uses another engineer's seal or certification fraudulently.

These violations undermine the entire licensure system designed to protect the public by ensuring only qualified individuals practice engineering.

3.3 Unauthorized Firm Practice

State boards also regulate engineering firms. Providing engineering services through a firm that lacks the necessary state registration is unlawful. Even when individual engineers are licensed, the firm must also be authorized.

Violations may include:

- Certifying documents on behalf of an unregistered firm.
- Offering engineering services through an unauthorized entity.
- Failing to supervise work adequately in a firm setting.

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Such misconduct raises questions about accountability and quality control.

3.4 Ethical Violations and Misrepresentation

Ethical lapses are among the most serious violations. They often involve:

- Certifying work not personally prepared or supervised.
- Falsifying documents, drawings, or reports.
- Misrepresenting qualifications or licensure status.
- Failing to act as a faithful agent or trustee for clients.

These actions erode trust in the engineering profession and can cause real harm if flawed designs are approved or safety standards ignored.

3.5 Failure to Cooperate with Investigations

When boards investigate a complaint or conduct an audit, engineers are required to respond. Failing to cooperate is itself a violation.

Examples include:

- Ignoring audit notices.
- Refusing to provide requested records.
- Failing to attend hearings or respond to complaints.

Non-cooperation can lead to default judgments and severe penalties.

3.6 Criminal Convictions

Boards can take disciplinary action when an engineer is convicted of a crime that reflects on their character or professional fitness. Such crimes might involve:

- Fraud, bribery, or corruption in connection with professional work.
- Felonies or misdemeanors involving violence, theft, or dishonesty.
- Crimes of moral turpitude, even if unrelated to engineering practice.

Boards typically review the nature of the offense, its relevance to professional duties, and any evidence of rehabilitation. Criminal convictions may lead to license suspension or revocation to protect the public and preserve trust in the profession.

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