When was the last time you had to make an ethical decision when writing or managing a grant? I am willing to bet it wasn’t long ago. In my 10 years of writing and managing grants, the subject of ethics has come up almost daily in my work. Is the frequency of ethical dilemmas a sign of the times in our society when moral fiber doesn’t seem to be as strong as it once was? Or is it the fact that grants are more and more competitive and, because of that, funders are now placing more restrictions and requiring a higher level of accountability?

I still recall my first formal grant training when the instructor told those of us attending that it was common practice to take pictures off the web and use them any way we wanted. Her exact words were, “No one will know that specific homeless person isn’t from your area.” I was appalled then, and I continue to be shocked and amazed at the questions I am asked and the times I have to respond, “If I am to write this grant, perhaps we can find a way to better represent the truth” or “Do you have the data to support that statement?”

Some would say that I can afford to be ethical as a full-time consultant and to that I would strongly disagree because even when I spent years as an employee writing grants for several non-profits, there was a very distinct line I would not cross. In fact, this is one of the reasons I love grant writing so much—the guidelines are set by funders, the objectives and strategies outlined in a proposal are your roadmap, and the budget is outlined when the grant is submitted. Once an Authorized Signatory signs for that grant, you are bound by certain restrictions that are not negotiable. Yes, there can be and often are amendments, but even those generally need approval and clear justification specified by the funder up front.

If I have learned nothing else in ten years, it is to know for what and when I need approval and to get everything in writing. As a grant professional, this protects you from times when your elected official or well-meaning project manager feel an unbudgeted expense or deviation from the work plan is not going to put your project in jeopardy. A simple email to the funder or a review of the guidelines can give you the evidence you need to educate those who are not as well versed as you are on what is allowable (or not) and the consequences of those seemingly harmless actions. This is where your expertise is necessary and most valuable.

We are in many ways the enforcers, and in being so, we have a professional and, in my opinion, personal choice. If we aren’t ethical, we jeopardize the project at hand and future funding, and that in turn could result in our clients being labeled “high risk”. Most importantly, we put our own reputation on the line and our profession at risk. My word is who I am as an individual, and we’ve worked hard to advance our credential.

Of course, in all of our lives, both personally and professionally we will face that moment when we are asked to cross that ethical line. As grant professionals, I hope we all have the courage to live up to the Grant Professional Association Code of Ethics as well as our own strong internal ethical standards. Together, if we set the bar high we can be proud of our integrity and our deserved recognition in a growing field where a great deal of good comes from our collaborative success with our clients in a society in need of the funding resources available.