

Is It Important to Have an Ethics Oath?

It happens at events year after year, including the CPCU Society Annual Meeting and Seminars, chapter conferment exercises, and chapter meetings. At a certain point, an officer asks that all CPCUs rise, raise their right hand and affirm publicly their professional commitment: "As a Chartered Property Casualty Underwriter: I shall strive at all times to live by the highest standards of professional conduct; ..." As all CPCUs know, this is the beginning of our oath, known to us as The CPCU Professional Commitment.

The CPCU Professional Commitment emphasizes the importance of ethics to the CPCU Society and its members. Ethics has always been part of the CPCU movement. The very first CPCU graduating class in 1943 recited what was then called the CPCU Charge. But for minor changes, the Charge became The Professional Commitment.

The Professional Commitment is an important aspect of being a CPCU. The medical profession has its Hippocratic Oath, which doctors have adhered to for many years. Recent developments in the business world caused certain educational institutions to develop or consider an MBA oath. There have also been writings about corporate ethics oaths to which all employees must adhere.

A primary purpose of a corporate or association oath is to make a public statement of belief in the highest ethical principles. Many believe all employees or members should make the oath together as a group. Committing to one's peers emphasizes an all-for-one-and-one-for-all mentality. Further, it reinforces the organization's desire to have its employees or members maintain the integrity of the organization. By going public with the oath, organizations are committing to stronger efforts to uphold these values.

It is important that an oath be taken by those at all levels. It is essential the commitment be from the top down. Having those in leadership roles adhere to the oath and participate in its public presentation sets the lead for all others.

An ethics oath reminds members of an organization, such as the CPCU Society, of their larger responsibilities to those they serve. Repeating the oath at different meetings and events allows newcomers to the organization to appreciate the importance placed on ethics. Having an individual openly participate in the oath places a personal responsibility on each member.

Simply because an organization has an oath that its employees or members take does not guarantee it will be adhered to by all. But it does increase the chances that those who make the commitment will aim for the highest standards. In the Society's case, it constantly reminds



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members of the purposes for which we became CPCUs, and encourages us to use our experience and talents for the good of others.

Having an oath such as The Professional Commitment is important because it sets a critical tone. Accountability, however, is also essential. All CPCUs are held to the commitment they make. It is for this reason that there is an enforcement process in place for those very few who fall short of the commitment.

An Annual Meeting and Seminars was recently held in Las Vegas. It was with pleasant anticipation that I was asked to stand, raise my right hand and affirm: "As a Chartered Property Casualty Underwriter: I shall strive at all times to live by the highest standards of professional conduct ..." As always, I look forward to recommitting to the values that are most important to the way CPCUs handle themselves in their personal and professional lives. ■

Editor's note: The opinions expressed in this column are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CPCU Society membership, the CPCU Society Ethics Committee or the author's employer. If you have suggestions for upcoming articles or comments about the "Question of Ethics" column, please contact William F. Traester, CPCU, at wtraester@archinsurance.com.