

Clown Ethics – Another Perspective

By David Newcomb

Assistant Education Director, I.S.C.A.

It was suggested to me recently that the topic of ethics might be an appropriate subject to write about and I have decided to heed that advice. Of course, ethics can be interpreted in many ways. As is my custom, I'm happy to offer my perspective and hopefully, I'll be successful in educating my readers.

First of all, what are ethics? Webster's defines "ethics" thus:

1 *plural but singular or plural in construction*: the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation

2 a: a set of moral principles or values b: a theory or system of moral values <the present-day materialistic ethic> c *plural but singular or plural in construction*: the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group <professional ethics> d: a guiding philosophy

How does this pertain to the International Shrine Clowns? Let's look at our Code of Conduct first.

ARTICLE X - CODE OF CONDUCT

Participating clowns, acts or stunts shall:

1. Not use any operating flashing emergency-type lights or sirens.
2. Not drink any intoxicating beverages before or during any parade, performance or public event while in costume.
3. Not wear a costume or use any equipment that may be offensive in this Association or to the General public.
4. Not touch women while in costume in public.
5. Not throw items of any kind. This includes candy, gum, novelties and balloons. These items may be handed out if other Rules and Regulations do not specifically prohibit.
6. Not use any obscene gestures or language while appearing in costume, makeup or uniform.
7. Not impersonate a woman, political figures or any ethnic or minority group, which might reflect unfavorably upon the Association and the Imperial Shrine.
8. Shall not appear at any Association function without current Shrine and Association dues cards. Also the Association patch must be worn.
9. Not smoke in costume in public. The use of DEAD cigar butts will be allowed for Tramp costumes.
10. The passing out of candy, gum or balloons will be permitted during functions of this Association except from vehicles.
11. Not use any domestic or wild animals, fowl or reptiles.
12. Not use full or partial face masks of any type.
13. Strive to look their best as a true Clown.

14. Not abuse spectators by subjecting them to practical humiliating jokes or by squirting or shocking them.

15. Not have any demeaning displays that may be considered in poor taste.

NOTE: The President or his emissary shall, at his discretion, have authority to discipline, including ejection from functions of this Association, any member who does not abide by this Code of Conduct as listed above

The rules of conduct are certainly important but ethics are another matter. The rules of conduct are written in the ISCA By-Laws. ISCA Clown Ethics, from my perspective, take these rules to another level. Ethics are the philosophy we all should abide by as we represent the Shrine Clowns Association. Ethics are the values we believe in and are represented in our thoughts, words and deeds. It's what differentiates us from the rest of the clown world. After all, we're not just clowns; we're "Shrine Clowns."

I ask you all to remember who and what we are to our audience. As Shrine Clowns, we represent imaginary celebrity figures to children of all ages. We are their imaginations, "come to life." We should aspire to the highest ideals to represent ourselves and our fraternity in the most honorable fashion. We have been entrusted with this honor and privilege and these thoughts should be foremost in our minds during our preparations and throughout our performances.

I suppose we all have been in situations which have required us to react to our audience without the preparation of experience or prior education. Have you ever had your audience pull your wig? Try to steal your nose? Stomp on your shoes? Reach into your pockets? Spray you with silly string? Every time we become Shrine Clowns, we are opening ourselves up to the possibility of situations which must be handled with proper thought, dignity and respect. But our reactions usually happen quickly and instinctively. Therefore, our ethics must be understood in order to be effective.

It can be easy to react to our audience with disapproval or even anger to their insensitive or inappropriate remarks and behavior. It's much more difficult to try to do or say the right thing. Because we are representing the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, it is imperative that we do so. We carry the reputation and tradition of years of noble and charitable works by thousands of Shriners who have gone before us.

What does this all mean? What is it that we must do or say to our audiences who sometimes make clowning a challenge? I believe it really comes down to common sense. It comes down to treating people with respect and dignity, regardless of their treatment of you. It means, above all else, to follow the Golden Rule and to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In other words, "Treat others only in ways that you would be willing to be treated if the situation was reversed." To apply this golden rule adequately, we should use knowledge and imagination. We should *know* what effect our actions will have on the lives of others. And we should be able to *imagine* ourselves, vividly and accurately, in the other person's place on the receiving end of the action. With knowledge, imagination, and the golden rule, we can represent our craft in the best possible manner.

The golden rule doesn't necessarily replace regular, normal morals. It isn't a guide on which our actions are right or wrong and it doesn't give us all the answers. It only prescribes a kind of consistency in that we have our actions (toward another) be in harmony with our desires (regarding a reversed situation). Basically, step into the other person's shoes beforehand and govern yourself accordingly. It tests our judgment. If we were to violate this golden rule, we would violate the spirit of fairness and concern that lie at the heart of morality.

One very important issue related to ethics has to do with “Clown Gags.” This issue has been discussed and written about for years but, it seems, there are those who choose to dismiss ethics and “do it their way.” Unfortunately, that creates problems within our organization. So, I’ll cover this in a clear and direct manner. If you see someone working his gag, performing his trick, doing his thing, performing his unique skit or simply doing something that nobody else is doing, particularly in your own unit or region, then you should simply understand that what he’s doing is “HIS GAG.” If you would like to use HIS GAG yourself, it is NOT ACCEPTABLE to just steal the gag. It is professional, fraternal, preferred and appropriate to first ask for his permission. In many cases, the clown will be flattered and will grant permission or offer to help you with your repertoire. Of course, it is common that the clown might not wish to give away his gag and will only wish to use it himself. He might think that he invented or developed his gag and he feels entitled to continue using it without conflict. I would agree with that but with the following recommendation. To me, if you can take the gag and improve it, change it or make it different- that is perfectly acceptable to do. However, try to always remember that communication is really the key. I would recommend first, talk with your clown colleague. In most cases, I’m confident that an agreement will be made and our fraternal brotherhood of Shrine Clowns will overcome any issues.

How many times have you been in a situation when you reacted to something or someone and afterwards thought about the result? How many times have you said to yourself, “I should have said this” or “I should have done that.” By the same token, how many times have you asked your clown colleagues what they might have done in difficult circumstances? These are all part of the learning curve of our craft and we must take the time and effort to recognize the difficulties we encounter and plan for our options in advance. Certainly we learn how various techniques work with different age groups or in different arenas. To become professional and proficient as clowns, we must learn from our experiences and try to perfect our acts for the best possible results. Ultimately, we’ll learn the craft and share our experiences and knowledge with each other and we’ll all benefit.

My guess is that you’re thinking, “So, how do I react to the Dad who tells his kid to stomp on my \$300 shoes?” “What do I do when a kid tries to snatch my glued-on red nose?” And how do you react to that child who is simply responding to his or her parent’s suggestions? In these situations, perhaps you might try to react as if this audience was your own child. Better still; try to imagine yourself as the lead actor in a video about the Shriners Fraternity and representing the greatest unit in Shrinedom. That seems like a relatively easy thing to do. That makes sense. What’s the problem?

Well, if you’re like me, clowning sometimes transforms me into another person. Sometimes I react totally differently in clown character than when I’m just “myself.” Clowning sometimes takes me to places and situations which might, in some instances, take me over the proverbial line. In trying to be funny or entertaining, we sometimes get ourselves into situations which are clearly of our own making. Then what? Then we must truly understand who and what we are. We must also remember that the Shrine is our responsibility and our actions are responsible for the public’s perception of us and the Shrine. The most important thing is to “care.” Care about ourselves. Care about our fraternity. Care about the hospitals and our reputation. Ultimately, care about the kids. Kids of all ages are what the Shrine and Shrine Clowns are all about.

Ethics are nothing more than a little common sense and a little effort. Ethics are a lot like the Golden Rule. If we can remember to give ourselves some time to think about the possibilities of what might happen, then maybe we might understand better how to react in those eventual circumstances, before they happen. Be the person you would want others to be. Aspire to be the best you can be. And always remember that we represent the greatest fraternity on the face of the earth. We represent the Shrine as Shrine Clowns. That, in itself is a responsibility as much as a reward. Know that. Think about that. You will be proud and glad that you have.

I hope this has given you some understanding of ethics as a Shrine Clown. As always, “Keep smiling.”