

**Some Thoughts on the Importance of Modesty and Decorum  
and an IETF Code of Conduct**

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Abstract

Because of the importance of the work done in the IETF, and because of the broad cultural diversity of the participants, some of whom find our most-unrestrained "style" of interaction rather foreign and uncomfortable, I believe the time has come for the IETF to adopt a Code of Conduct to govern our interactions.

**1.0 Background**

The Internet Engineering Task Force is the unique, all-volunteer organization promulgating the standards which make the global Internet technically viable. As such, the participants who do this critical work are very bright, usually quite passionate individuals, often with strong opinions which are equally strongly held.

The IETF has a long tradition of evolving ideas forged in the fires of impassioned analysis which then go on to be tempered by confrontation with real-world operational deployment before they are deemed "a standard."

The its very nature, this process of vigorous debate and evaluation makes for the occasionally over-animated interchange between well-intentioned people. A free-ranging exchange of ideas and viewpoints is critical to the success of the process, but when it oversteps the bounds of modesty and decorum, it is to the detriment of the process.

## **2.0 Codes of Conduct**

Historically, many great deliberative bodies have attempted to wrestle with the conflicting demands of passion and reason by establishing a "code of conduct" which serves to remind the deliberants of their obligations to their colleagues. While the antiquarian honorifics such as "The Gentleman from Upper Lowerville" and "The Honorable Senator from East Noseblow" strike the modern ear with some humor, the underlying agreement to treat each other with a respectable level of civility is the critical matter.

Such codes of conduct reinforce the tenets of honest debate and create a bond of honor which can and does get called when the heat of passion overtakes the machinery of reason. This provides an agreed-upon obligation to pull back from the brink of personal insult and affront, providing an opportunity for reason to salvage honor.

## **3.0 The Need for a Code of Conduct in the IETF**

Because of the importance of the work done in the IETF and because of the broad cultural diversity of the participants, some of whom find our most-unrestrained "style" of interaction hard rather foreign and uncomfortable, I believe the time has come for the IETF to adopt a Code of Conduct to govern our interactions. It would apply to in-person interactions like those at the IETF Meetings, but also to Email exchanges as well where the level of invective tends to escalate even faster than in face-to-face interactions.

It has become clear that the IETF is missing opportunities to review some very important technology because the creators chose to go elsewhere to define these technologies. We are also denied the expertise of smart people who could otherwise contribute significantly to what we do but chose not to subject themselves to behavior we have previously excused as "unrefined advocacy."

Note carefully that the intent is not to proscribe any particular behavior, but rather to affirm a commitment to a course of action and an attitude toward each other which will improve the effectiveness of our deliberations. Or said in a somewhat more IETF-like way:

"Reduce the heat and increase the light."



#### **4.0 Precepts of the IETF Code of Conduct.**

What follows is a list of precepts which form the IETF Code of Conduct. Adherence to these in both action and spirit will promote the general welfare of the IETF community and promote more productive deliberations. Variance from them should only provoke a gentle reminder, not provide grounds for flamewars.

- (1a) The IETF is composed of many people from many cultures and does work having global scope and importance.
- (1b) An IETF Member honors the organization by extending his colleagues respect and honest courtesy at all times, especially when it is difficult to agree with them. Seeing from another's point of view is often revealing, even when it fails to be compelling.
- (2a) The business of the IETF is the development and testing of Ideas.
- (2b) An IETF Member disputes an idea with reasoned argument rather than attacking the colleague proposing the idea. Intimidation and Ad Homonym attack have no place in reasoned deliberations, especially so for casting aspersions upon a participant's motivations.
- (2c) Likewise, "witty repartee'" and rhetorical one-upsmanship have scant use in technical discussions. While spirited word-play may be an emotionally satisfying diversion and may occasionally provide much-needed comic relief, it is at best only a diversion and does not advance the real business of the IETF. Worse, when done badly or to intentionally prickle another, it serves only to increase contentiousness and breed rancor.
- (3a) The goal of the IETF is a working, viable, scalable global Internet and the concomitant problems are genuinely very hard.
- (3b) An IETF Member always proceeds based on Right Reason and strives to be as intellectually honest as she knows how to be. Further, she dedicates her intellect to solving the problems in the best way, not merely the most expedient.
- (3c) An IETF Member understands that "Scaling is the Ultimate Problem" and that many ideas quite workable in the small fail this crucial test.
- (3d) An IETF Member strives to find the best solution for the whole Internet, not the best solution for any particular vendor, operator or user. Few things are as unseemly as transparent axe-grinding.
- (4a) "Best" is a very tricky concept, fluid and dynamic.
- (4b) An IETF Member understands change is one of the few certainties and that without the exercise of supreme discipline, one can spend



eternity working for unknowable perfection while the real-world problems languish, denied adequate attention. (4c) An IETF Member is keenly aware that solutions unfettered by consideration of global deployability are likely to be unproductive.

- (5a) An IETF Member strives at all times to abide by this code and the spirit it embodies. This spirit is all-encompassing, and is especially applicable to electronic exchanges such as email and telephony as well as in-person interactions.
- (5b) When a colleague suffers a lapse in adherence to this spirit, an IETF Member offers a gentle but forthright reminder of their agreement to honor this spirit. Castigation and remonstrations are inappropriate in all except the most refractory situations, and even then, it should never cross the line into personal invective and dishonor.
- (5c) An IETF Member apologizes appropriately in private or in public for any offense caused to other members.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

By every IETF member adhering to this code of conduct we can promote the vigorous but measured exchanges required for the work we pursue without unrequired incursions into the realm of personal invective. This should make the IETF a more pleasant experience for all.

## **6.0 Security Considerations and Other Matters**

Security (other than personal) is not addressed in this memo.

Canon Law regarding the use of certain auxiliary verbs ("SHOULD", "MUST", etc) is deemed inapplicable.

## **7.0 Author's Address**

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