

**15 THOUGHTS  
REGARDING ETHICS AND INTEGRITY**

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## 15 THOUGHTS REGARDING ETHICS AND INTEGRITY

- **Prevention first.**
  - Education regarding/discussion of ethical principles creates the foundation for an ethical organization. It needs to be thought about and talked about. It will not just happen.
- **Never forget the newspaper rule.**
  - If you would have any qualms about reading on the front page of your local newspaper what you did or didn't do in a particular circumstance, that should be a warning sign to you.
- **Just because it is legal doesn't mean it is ethical.**
  - Don't confuse "legal" with "ethical." A leader who is deemed to have integrity and ethics is held to a much higher standard than not break the law.
- **Leaders need to "walk the talk."**
  - Regardless of what the leader of an organization says regarding ethics, their **conduct** will have a profound effect on whether or not ethical conduct becomes the norm in that organization.
- **Create an ethical organizational culture.**
  - The consistent application of ethical standards within an organization will establish clear norms of ethical conduct that will result in an "ethical culture."
- **It isn't just a matter of your being ethical.**
  - The hard truth is that as a leader of your organization, you won't be held accountable just for your conduct, but also for your organization's. Are you doing enough preventative work, and if there is a problem, will you know about it? Is it safe (and perceived to be safe) in your organization to point out a problem?

- **Now that it has happened...**
  - An organization and its leaders will be judged as much (if not more) for how they respond to an ethical failure as the failure itself. Remember that doing nothing is a choice for which you may be held accountable.
- **When is soon enough?**
  - Upon becoming aware of an ethical problem, carefully evaluate how much time you have to determine what to do. Explaining after an ethical breach becomes public that you would have eventually done something rings hollow.
- **Is it your job?**
  - Carefully evaluate what your role is in addressing an ethical lapse. There are times when we can talk ourselves out of doing what we should and other times when we might prematurely take on the responsibilities of others.
- **Think about the consequences.**
  - Have a mature understanding of the consequences of responding or not responding to an ethical lapse. While there can be significant negative consequences to taking action, you can be viewed as complicit in an unethical behavior if you do not. In a worst-case scenario, are you willing to "lose your job to save your career" (not to mention your integrity and reputation)?
- **When it happens, full disclosure (and early).**
  - One of the most critical components of managing ethical crises is to make sure there is "full disclosure" of all relevant facts. There have been many instances (ever heard of Watergate?) where an alleged "cover-up" ends up superseding the original alleged ethical breach.
- **Keep the organization focused.**
  - During a time of ethical crises, it is easy for an organization to become distracted and be less effective in providing its important services. If the leader of the organization doesn't appear distracted by crises, it can help the organization keep its focus.

- **Supporting the innocent.**
  - There may be a number of "innocent bystanders" within the organization that are dragged into an ethical crisis and its aftermath. Do whatever you can to support these individuals to help minimize any negative impacts on them.
- **Recovering from the crises.**
  - Once the crises have passed, start to help the organization recover. Focus on how the organization can become better/stronger as a result of the incident. Hopefully, you will be able to communicate that the organization's values were reinforced by its response to the ethical crises. The public can often be quick to forgive lapses if corrective action is taken and appropriate *mea culpa* offered.
- **Last, but certainly not least:**
  - Always keep in mind that all those positions of authority in an organization experiencing an ethical crisis will be asked:
    1. What did you know?
    2. When did you know it?
    3. What did you do about it?

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