

Ethics quality

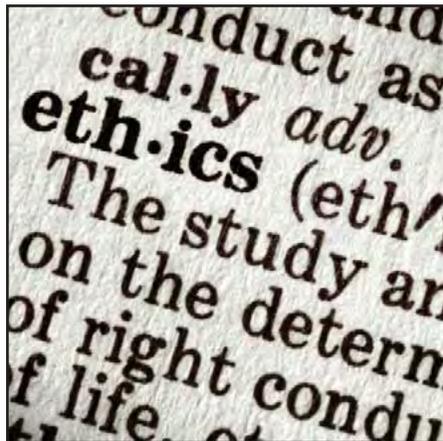
helps build healthy organizations

By Melissa M. Bottrell, MPH, Ph.D.

Chief, Integrated Ethics, National Center for Ethics in Health Care

VA is committed to excellence in health care, and quality is an essential component of that excellence. However, there are different types of quality. Technical quality (for example, a surgery that was performed well) and service quality (a patient who was satisfied with the care received) are important—but not enough. For the achievement of true excellence, ethics quality is also indispensable.

In general terms, ethics quality means that clinical and administrative practices are consistent with accepted ethics standards, norms or expectations for the conduct of a health care organization and its staff. In VA, it means that these practices align with VA's commitment to patient-centered care, which enables our patients



to make voluntary and well-informed health care choices. Ethics quality also means employees find it easier and more encouraging to “do the right thing.”

Ethics quality contributes significantly to the health of any organization, and VA is no exception. Data from the 2012 [Voice of VA Integrated Ethics Staff Survey \(IESS\)](#) (see Graph 1) show links between employee perceptions of their organization as ethical and indicators of patient care quality and organizational health. Notably, higher perceptions of the organization's ethical environment are correlated with better patient satisfaction on the Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patients (SHEP) survey, fewer sick leave hours and less nursing turnover. Positive perceptions of the ethical environment are also associated with better scores on VA's All Employee Survey (AES), including higher levels of psychological safety, greater overall satisfaction and lower levels of employee burnout.

Graph 1: Strength of Association (correlation coefficient)* between Organizational Health Factors and Overall Rating of Facility as an Ethical Organization (IESS D1).



*Correlation Coefficient is a measure of the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables. The bigger the bar above, the bigger the positive relationship between the items listed and survey respondents' overall rating of their organization as ethical.

Specific leadership behaviors, such as whether or not senior managers communicate that ethics is a priority; follow up on ethical concerns; and do not tolerate retaliation for reporting ethics concerns; and whether employees believe they are treated fairly, influence whether staff perceive the organization as ethical (*see Graph 2*).

Importantly, leaders may be highly ethical, but may not be perceived that way by others. Leaders who are “ethically silent,” and who do not publically and regularly demonstrate a commitment to ethics, can leave staff believing that ethics is not as important as other organizational priorities. On ethics, leaders need to lead from the top, just as they do on other VA strategic goals.

To support an organizational commitment to ethics, VHA Integrated Ethics (IE) program staff have, at regular intervals since 2008, reviewed IESS data to identify ethics quality deficits, particularly around

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ethical leadership practices. Using IE tools and local ingenuity, they undertook more than 400 quality improvement activities to foster leadership behaviors supporting an ethical environment and culture in VHA:

- Prioritizing “doing the right thing” over “getting to green” in performance goals;
- Making organizational processes (e.g., hiring committees, leadership decision-making) more equitable by reducing the influence of personal relationships; and
- Ensuring that employees feel safe and encouraged and do not fear retaliation when they bring forward potential ethical concerns

Overall, these projects seek to make it easy for all employees to take actions consistent with **VA I CARE core values**.

Leaders and supervisors throughout VA who wish to assess whether their own behaviors support an ethical environment and culture can use these IE tools:

- An informational [primer and video](#) explaining ethical leadership concepts

- The [Ethical Leadership Self-Assessment Tool](#), which leaders can use to assess and make action plans to improve specific ethical leadership behaviors;
- Tools to spark discussion of how **VA I CARE core values** apply in the workplace and to open the space to bring forward ethical concerns
- Quick (15 minute) activities that can be used to build ethical leadership skills
- A [checklist](#) to support ethical leadership improvement project design

All staff can use the “[Talk about Ethics](#)” tool, which suggests ways staff can help bridge conversations about ethics.

To achieve ethics quality and build healthy organizations, all VA staff must bring organizational values into their work each day. In turn, leaders must model ethical leadership excellence. By creating a tone of ethical leadership at the top and empowering staff in an ethical culture to consider ethics in everyday decisions, we can achieve this goal.

The letter/number combinations, below relate to information listed in Graph 2:

1. Demonstrate that ethics is a priority
 - Talk about ethics (M3)
 - Prove that ethics matters to you (W2, W3)
 - Encourage discussion of ethical concerns (W4, M1, M2, M5)
2. Communicate clear expectations for ethical practice
 - Recognize when expectations need to be clarified (M4)
 - Be explicit, give examples, explain the underlying values
 - Anticipate barriers to meeting your expectations
3. Practice ethical decision making
 - Identify decisions that raise ethical concerns
 - Address ethical decisions systematically
 - Explain your decisions (RA2, RA3)
4. Support your local ethics program
 - Know what your program is and what it does
 - Champion the program (W6)
 - Support participation by others (W6)

Graph 2: Strength of Influence (effect size)* of Ethical Leadership Practices on Overall Rating of Facility as an Ethical Organization (IESS D1).



*Effect size provides the estimated magnitude of a relationship between a set of items and an outcome.

