

# IntegratedEthics<sup>®</sup> Ethical Leadership Activity

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## IntegratedEthics<sup>®</sup> Compass Point One: Demonstrate That Ethics Is a Priority

### How to Follow Up on Ethical Concerns

#### OVERVIEW

This ethical leadership activity is designed for use in group settings by facility, VISN and VACO leaders and by developing leaders. It requires a session facilitator and a meeting room equipped with a laptop and projector. The exercise is designed to be completed in 30 minutes, which includes time for a group discussion.

#### The goals of the activity are to:

1. Help field and VACO leadership understand the importance of following up on ethical concerns.
2. Allow field and VACO leadership an opportunity to practice what to say to staff when an ethical concern is brought forward to leadership.

#### Learning objectives:

At the end of this activity participants will be able to:

- Describe the role of leaders in ensuring a prompt and authentic response when staff raise an ethical concern.
- Link ethical concerns to a specific value.
- Use specific strategies to follow up effectively on ethical concerns.

#### Brief description:

During this interactive session (which is structured like a “speed dating” event), learners will review one or more scenario-based ethical concerns, independently draft a bulleted script responding to one of the concerns, and then pair up to practice delivering the response and offering feedback. The entire group will then reconvene to share the impressions and insights they gained from the activity.

The session facilitator uses slides and supporting handouts to provide brief contextual information, gives instructions for the activity, presents the scenarios, offers a set of tips for developing scripts, and facilitates the group discussion following the exercise. Three scenarios are offered for this exercise. Facilitators can choose one or more, or substitute a story of their own.

## IE Leadership Activity

### Timing:

1. Introduction: three minutes
2. Participants draft scripts: five minutes
3. Participants pair up to deliver responses and offer feedback: 14 minutes total (seven minutes per participant)
4. Group discussion: eight minutes

### Materials:

1. Slides with speaker's notes
2. Handout: *Tips for Responding to an Ethical Concern*
3. Handout: *Draft Your Script*

### Optional follow-up:

At the end of the session, the facilitator may ask group members to plan for a follow-up activity. Follow-up activities help ensure the material taught in the activity is used and that learners reflect on their ability to apply the skills taught.

In preparation for a follow-up session, the facilitator should ask participants to do all of the following:

1. Participants should keep track of the conversations they have had with staff in a journal or log.
2. Participants should reflect on their conversations and take note of what appeared to go well and what could have been improved.
3. After trying out this practice in their local settings, participants should reconvene as a group in about six weeks to share their successes, lessons learned and recommendations.

The facilitator should schedule a follow-up meeting and be prepared to ask for observations from the participants. Remember to return to the *Tips* sheet to help leaders hone their message to staff. It is also natural for leaders to want to talk about what they do with some of the problems brought to them. The facilitator can remind them to use *Triage Tool for Ethics-related Leadership Decisions* if they require guidance on how issues raised by staff relate to ethics, and what the first steps are for addressing them.

## Handout: Tips for Responding to an Ethical Concern

- a. Remember to thank the employee for raising the ethics issue or concern.
- b. Describe the ground rules for your discussion. These can include:
  - All ideas will be listened to with respect.
  - All discussions will be held confidential when possible. When, to resolve an issue, confidentiality cannot be maintained, explain what information will be divulged and to whom.
  - The employee will experience no retaliation on the basis of anything that is said during the session.
- c. Clarify your role up front, which is to learn about ethics issues or concerns that staff might have and address them as appropriate. Be optimistic that acceptable solutions will be found which will result in a more positive ethics environment and culture at the facility.
- d. Demonstrate listening skills and show empathy to make participation worthwhile. These skills include reflective listening, seeking input and active listening. Be aware of, and minimize, any verbal or nonverbal cues that may come across as domineering or judgmental.
- e. Tie the issue or concern to a value. ("I am very glad you brought this to my attention. Issues like this are important because...it reminds us of our priorities to serve Veterans...to treat each other with respect...to be respectful stewards of public money...")
- f. Model humility. When appropriate, acknowledge that you don't have all the information right now, and you (or others you assign) will have to find out more.
- g. Tell the employee who or what group or committee will be assigned to follow up on the issue.
- h. Describe the process you expect to take place in follow-up. While in some cases the full process may not yet be immediately clear, at least describe the immediate next steps for each concern.
- i. Describe how long follow-up is likely to take.
- j. Inform the employee how he/she should expect to hear about the outcome of the further action. For example, the employee could be:
  - contacted directly to be involved in further exploration (such as when an ethics consult is warranted);
  - informed directly of the outcome; or
  - briefed through a summary that will be discussed and circulated in the facility, using a standing mechanism (e.g., topic at the next town hall, article in an ethics newsletter, notice in daily announcements). In such cases, the employee should also be informed directly about the outcome of the concern they raised.
- k. If the ethical concern involves an issue in which the privacy of others needs to be maintained (such as a personnel or patient concern), explain that:
  - patients and other employees have a right to privacy in many circumstances;
  - the employee will learn when the review or investigation of the issue has been completed, and that action appropriate to its findings has been taken (or will be taken); and
  - this right to privacy precludes facility leadership from sharing further details of the resolution with the individual who raised the concern.

## Handout: Draft Your Script

Good ethical decision making requires that a leader gather relevant information; involve stakeholders; identify relevant standards, norms and values; consider precedents and outcomes; and reflect on the impact the decision will have on the leader's and organization's reputation. In this initial intake step, you will set the groundwork for this process. Your focus in this exercise should be on ensuring that the staff member feels heard and understood, and leaves knowing that their concern has been taken seriously and follow-up steps will occur.

Review the following case scenarios. Choose one on which to base a script that provides a short but authentic response. Use the *Tips for Responding to an Ethical Concern* handout for guidance. Remember that in this exercise you are doing intake, gathering information and building a relationship rather than solving a problem.

Working on your own for five minutes, draft a brief, bulleted script of what you would say to staff if they brought this concern to you.

After you draft your script, pair with someone else and take turns practicing the response. If you are the listener, be prepared to offer feedback to the response and how it is delivered. Each of you should plan on taking a total of seven minutes delivering your response and receiving your partner's feedback. After 14 minutes, the entire group will reconvene to debrief.

### Scenario 1

A staff member makes an appointment to meet with you and shares the following ethical concern:

"The manager of the mental health unit asked the primary care team to cut back on referrals because they (the mental health unit) are understaffed. Many of our patients have serious mental health issues that can't be adequately addressed in primary care."

How will you respond?

### Scenario 2

A staff member comes forward with the following concern:

"A front-line supervisor consistently comes in late or leaves early from work. Even though the supervisor works through her lunch break, staff know that she isn't at her work station during her full tour of duty. I'm particularly concerned because I now see some junior staff starting to pick up the same behavior."

How will you respond?

**Scenario 3**

A staff member comes forward with the following concern:

“I can’t sleep at night. Every day I work with patients I know are eligible to receive non-VA care, and who need it. I have been told not to make a referral unless it is to the Veterans Choice Program. Many of my patients aren’t eligible for that program. What do I do?”

How will you respond?

