

# IntegratedEthics<sup>®</sup> Action Kit - Ethical Leadership

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

### Quadrad Ethics Office Hours

#### OVERVIEW

This action kit for ethical leadership (EL) is designed for use by the facility director and other senior members of facility leadership, i.e., the quadrad. Action kits are disseminated to help facilities implement strong practices that have been developed, tested and refined at other sites. The purpose of Quadrad Ethics Office Hours is to provide a transparent, accessible and ongoing mechanism for senior leaders to hear about and handle ethical concerns from staff well before they become triggers for a “whistleblower” event. Office hours provide an opportunity for facility leadership to build rapport and trust with staff and open channels for communication. The practice, which leaders are encouraged to undertake on a regular basis, is related to Ethical Leadership Compass Point One: Demonstrate that ethics is a priority – specifically:

- Talk about ethics.
- Prove that ethics matters to you (by following up on ethical concerns).
- Encourage discussions of ethical concerns.

Compass Point Two, Communicate clear expectations for ethical practice, may also apply when re-direction is required to ensure staff members understand expectations for ethical practice.

Quadrad Ethics Office Hours is based on a successful practice that was developed at the Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center (Iron Mountain, MI). At that facility, the director invites staff to “spend 10 minutes with the director” and share their concerns with him. Every Friday, between 2:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m., he opens his office and his schedule for this purpose. Engaging supervisors/service chiefs as appropriate, the director follows up on all issues or questions brought to him by staff. He will frequently directly share the answers with the employees who raised the concerns — often by visiting their worksite or calling them on the phone. However, if an employee raises a disciplinary issue, the director explains that while he will follow up on it, he cannot discuss the outcomes of those types of concerns. When asked why he holds these office hours, the director said, “It is important to me that staff feel like they have access to top leadership and are not afraid to bring up issues.”

**The goals of the activities described in this action kit are to:**

1. Provide a structured environment, time and format for ethical discussions between leaders and staff in order to promote a more positive ethics environment and culture. Here, leaders model behaviors described in the ethical leadership compass points, particularly those of the first compass point.
2. Help leaders learn and use key EL concepts.
3. Demonstrate to all staff that leaders at the facility believe ethics is important, are willing to talk about ethics and follow up on ethical concerns.

**Learning objectives:**

After engaging in the activities described in this action kit, participants will be able to:

- Plan for and implement a structured opportunity for staff to talk with them about ethics matters.
- Use specific strategies to respond effectively to ethical concerns raised by staff in this forum.

**Brief description:**

This action kit describes steps for establishing Quadrad Ethics Office Hours, in which senior facility leaders are available and willing to talk about ethics matters in an accessible location during regularly scheduled periods (approximately one to two hours). An assigned staff member (or member of the leadership team) takes responsibility for coordinating the activity, using the tools provided to plan and implement the office hours.

**Issues to consider:**

***Who should hold office hours:*** Quadrad Ethics Office Hours are intended to be held by the facility director and other members of the quadrad. The seniority of those holding the office hours is a highly visible statement that “ethics matters.” Prior to initiating these sessions, leaders may elect to participate in the EL activity “How to Follow Up on Ethical Concerns,” which provides an opportunity to practice responding to ethical concerns raised by staff.

***Where to hold office hours:*** Each facility will need to consider the tradeoffs between the convenience and symbolism of holding the office hours in, for example, the director’s office vs. choosing a venue that may offer more privacy or convenience. A neutral territory (e.g., near the lobby or cafeteria) or different work locations (e.g., clinical settings) can help staff feel comfortable interacting with leaders, but might also open them to scrutiny from other employees. Each facility will need to consider what might work best in their local culture.

***How to promote psychological safety for employees:*** Psychological safety is the degree to which employees trust that asking questions, sharing new ideas, raising concerns, disclosing honest mistakes and reporting violations will not be penalized or perceived negatively in the workplace. Leaders can promote feelings of safety among employees who meet with them by establishing basic safety norms at the sessions. In

addition, follow the guidance in the *Tips* sheet for engaging in active listening, acknowledging the limits of their current knowledge and avoiding behaviors that may be perceived as domineering or judgmental.

**How remote employees will participate:** Employees located away from the main facility (e.g., at a CBOC or ambulatory clinic) may wish to participate even if they are not able to attend a meeting in person. Consider whether the leader would like to allow video conferencing or phone conversations. If yes, make sure information about this option is included in announcement materials. Alternatively, consider whether holding office hours at remote sites on a rotating basis would work within your health care system. If leaders choose this option, include information about it in announcements, so that staff at remote sites know that their location will receive a visit in upcoming months.

**How to manage scheduling and sign-up:** In addition to choosing the most feasible method for advance sign-ups, leaders may want to consider whether they will plan for and accommodate walk-ins. During the initial sessions, before word of mouth and momentum build, leaders are likely to have gaps in the schedule. Additionally, consider whether leaders want to support small groups who may want to meet regarding a common concern; if so, they may need more than the regular 10-minute slot. Finally, there may be staff members who will want to bring a union representative with them to the meeting. This should be accommodated.

**How to manage follow-up:** Some facilities will already have developed mechanisms for leadership follow-up when staff raise ethical concerns. Others may need to develop new mechanisms and designate staff and other resources with responsibility for follow-up. Facilities should plan to use the *Triage Tool for Ethics-related Leadership Decisions* as a primary resource for identifying which concerns require immediate follow-up. In many cases, the plan for follow-up may not be immediately clear. However, in every case, the person raising the concern should be told about immediate next steps and how they will be kept informed about the ultimate/final/ response to their concern.

**Evaluation and Improvement:** To help ensure the intervention is effective, the coordinator and participating leadership should plan to review the activity together after several sessions. The purpose of the review is to identify lessons learned, consolidate ideas for improvements and ensure that routine follow up is occurring with participants who raised specific concerns. In addition, the team should consider a mechanism to gather feedback from staff participants. For instance, as participants prepare to leave the session, leaders could hand them a card or paper with a link to a brief on-line survey, and ask them to help improve the process by completing the survey. The survey could ask two to four questions, such as:

1. Would you recommend attending office hours to other staff? Y/N
2. What more could [the leader's name] do to put you at ease?
3. What more could [the leader's name] do to encourage other staff to participate?
4. Do you feel attending office hours was worthwhile? Y/N Why?

**Appended Materials:**

Instructions: Quadrad Ethics Office Hours

Handout: Tips for Responding to an Ethical Concern

Poster Template: Quadrad Ethics Office Hours

All Staff Email Template: Invitation to Staff to Sign Up for a Meeting with a Leader

Follow-up Email Template: Scheduled Participants

Follow-up Email Template: Wait-listed Participants

## Instructions: Quadrad Ethics Office Hours

For use by the staff member or facility leader responsible for coordinating this activity.

### Introduction:

In IntegratedEthics, ethical leadership behavior is defined by four ethical leadership compass points. Compass Point One is to demonstrate that ethics is a priority by talking about ethics; proving that ethics matters to you (by following up on ethical concerns); and encouraging discussions of ethical concerns. This intervention will help senior facility leaders demonstrate this key ethical leadership compass point and build relationships and trust with staff.

The intent of Quadrad Ethics Office Hours is to make evident to all staff that senior facility leadership are consistently committed and available to staff who have ethical concerns, and committed to taking responsibility for addressing those concerns. Responses to the IntegratedEthics Staff Survey revealed that following up on ethical concerns was among the top four measures associated with staff perceptions of an organization's overall ethics quality.<sup>1</sup> When staff members believe that they work in a positive ethics environment and culture, they tend to have higher morale, which is reflected by higher rates of productivity and staff satisfaction and lower rates of absenteeism, turnover and retaliatory behaviors.

The open office hours format gives all staff a specific time and place to speak individually with a member of the quadrad and receive a response to their concern.

### Instructions for the leader initiating Quadrad Ethics Office Hours:

1. Introduce the concept of Quadrad Ethics Office Hours as an agenda item at a regularly scheduled senior leadership team meeting. Adapt the "Introduction" text above and ask the senior leadership team for a commitment to implement this activity. Solicit suggestions for a recurring date/time for the event (e.g., every second Wednesday from 1:00 – 2:00 p.m.), determine which member of the quadrad will host the first session, and inform the Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator accordingly.
2. Distribute the handout *Tips for Responding to an Ethical Concern* to the members of the leadership team holding office hours.
3. Designate an Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator who will:
  - a. ensure that leaders' time is reserved for the office-hour sessions;
  - b. reserve an office or conference room that will be suitable for the activity, if needed;
  - c. publicize Quadrad Ethics Office Hours by adapting the poster template and displaying it prominently throughout the facility;

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<sup>1</sup> Foglia MB, Cohen JH, Pearlman RA, Bottrell, MM, & Fox, E. (2013): Perceptions of Ethical Leadership and the Ethical Environment and Culture: IntegratedEthics® Staff Survey Data from the VA Health Care System, *AJOB Primary Research*, 4:1, 44-58

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- d. send the all-staff invitation to the office hours; and
- e. schedule the 10-minute sessions between staff members and the senior leader.
4. To create a supportive climate for the sessions, develop and briefly share ground rules that specifically address psychological safety. They can include the following:
  - a. All ideas will be listened to with respect.
  - b. 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.
  - c. The employee will experience no retaliation on the basis of anything that is said during the session.
5. Retain Quadrad Ethics Office Hours on the senior leadership team meeting's agenda and debrief regularly with leaders who have participated in the event to gather insights (and adapt the activity as necessary), determine who will host the next session, and inform the Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator accordingly.
6. Develop a mechanism for tracking and resolving the ethical concerns raised by staff during office hours. Use the *Triage Tool for Ethics-related Leadership Decisions* as appropriate.
7. Follow up with staff who raised ethical concerns (either personally or through the coordinator or other authorized/knowledgeable person) with as much detail as can be shared on how and when their concerns are being addressed and/or resolved.

### **Instructions for the Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator:**

1. Send an Outlook invitation to the senior leader who has signed up for the next office-hours session to reserve their time, or use your local system for making appointments on that person's calendar.
2. Reserve a suitable office or conference room for the session (i.e., accessible while offering auditory and visual privacy). Some leaders may choose to use their office for this purpose. Others may choose an alternate location that feels accessible to most staff, such as near the cafeteria or lobby.
3. At least one week in advance of the next session, post notices and send an invitation to all staff that describes the opportunity and invites staff to respond by a certain date if they are interested in a 10-minute private meeting with the leader.
4. Collect staff responses, assign time slots (after the deadline) to those who accepted the invitation, and inform them of their time slot in a follow-up email. If all staff cannot be accommodated during any given session, inform those individuals that they have been added to a wait list, and prioritize scheduling them for the next session as appropriate. If you reserve part of the schedule for drop-ins, those without a scheduled appointment could be informed of the drop-in period. For example: "Scheduled appointments occur from 1:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m. Drop-ins are welcome from 1:30 p.m. – 2:00 p.m."

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5. On the day of the office-hours session, stay tuned for last-minute staff cancellations, and attempt to accommodate those without appointments if the leader is open to meeting with walk-ins.
6. If the task of following up on ethical concerns is assigned to you, maintain the list of open ethical concerns raised by staff, and provide support to the leadership team in addressing concerns and following up with staff (as appropriate) with information regarding the status of their concerns.

## 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.

## Facility Poster Template

# Please come to *[Facility Name]* Quadrad Ethics Office Hours

Is there something in the workplace that doesn't feel "right"? Do you have a concern that is keeping you up at night? Do you think we aren't living up to our values at this facility? Do you want to be sure that senior leadership knows about your concern?

Whatever your ethics topic may be, the quadrad invites you to come talk about it.

Beginning *[month]*, senior facility leaders *[will hold/are holding]* regular Quadrad Ethics Office Hours to hear and respond to your concerns in a safe and private one-on-one meeting. The *[first/next]* session will be:

*[Date, time and place] with [leader]*

Watch your email for an invitation from *[name]*, the Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator. When you respond to the invitation, a 10-minute time slot will be reserved for your private meeting with the senior leader.

Don't know what an ethics topic is? Consider the following questions:

- How well does our facility promote shared decision making between clinicians and patients about their health care?
- How well does our facility address ethical aspects of caring for patients near the end of life?
- How well does our facility promote ethical practices as they relate to the beginnings of life (e.g., pregnancy)?
- How well does our facility protect patient privacy and confidentiality?
- How well does our facility support behavior appropriate for health care professionals?
- How fair is our facility in allocating resources across programs, services, and patients?
- How well does our facility promote high ethical standards in its business and management practices?
- How well does our facility foster behavior appropriate for government employees?
- How well does our facility ensure that its employees follow ethical standards for research practices?
- How well does our facility support ethical behavior in everyday workplace interactions?

*Please spread the word!*

## All Staff Email Template

**Subject:**

You Are Invited to Share Ethical Concerns with [Name of participating quadrad member]

From: [Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator]

**Body:**

To all staff:

Is there something in the workplace that doesn't feel "right"? Do you have a concern that is keeping you up at night? Do you think we aren't living up to our values at this facility? Do you want to be sure that senior leadership knows about your concern?

Whatever your ethics topic may be, the quadrad invites you to come talk about it.

Beginning [month], senior facility leaders [will hold/are holding] regular Quadrad Ethics Office Hours to give you an opportunity to share ethical concerns in a safe and private one-on-one meeting with a member of the leadership team.

**The [first/next] session with [leader name] will be [date, time] at [location].**

I will schedule your 10-minute private time slot on a first come, first-served basis. If you don't want to commit right now, you can contact me the day of the event, and I may be able to arrange your meeting with [leader's name] if time is still available.

Don't know what an ethics topic is? Consider the following questions:

- How well does our facility promote collaborative decision making between clinicians and patients about their health care?
- How well does our facility address ethical aspects of caring for patients near the end of life?
- How well does our facility promote ethical practices as they relate to the beginnings of life (e.g., pregnancy)?
- How well does our facility protect patient privacy and confidentiality?
- How well does our facility support behavior appropriate for health care professionals?
- How fair is our facility in allocating resources across programs, services, and patients?
- How well does our facility promote high ethical standards in its business and management practices?
- How well does our facility foster behavior appropriate for government employees?
- How well does our facility ensure that its employees follow ethical standards for research practices?
- How well does our facility support ethical behavior in everyday workplace interactions?

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If you have any questions about Quadrad Ethics Office Hours, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you! The quadrad looks forward to hearing from you.

[Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator]

## Follow-up Email Template: Scheduled Participants

**Subject:**

Re: Your Meeting with [Name of participating leader]

From: [Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator]

**Body:**

Dear [staff name],

Thank you for your interest in Quadrad Ethics Office Hours.

**You are scheduled to meet with [Name of participating leader] between [e.g., 10:10 a.m. – 10:20 a.m.] on [e.g., Tuesday, May 19] in [office or conference room]. [He/she] is looking forward to meeting with you and hearing your ethical concern(s).**

If you cannot make this appointment, please contact me so that I can make the time available to another interested staff member.

Best wishes,

[Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator]

## Follow-up Email Template: Wait-listed Participants

**Subject:**

Re: Your Meeting with [Name of participating leader]

From: [Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator]

**Body:**

Dear [staff name],

Thank you for your interest in Quadrad Ethics Office Hours.

[Name of participating leader] is looking forward to meeting with you and hearing your ethical concern(s). However, we have had more interest in this event than we can accommodate right now. Unfortunately, all time slots for this Quadrad Ethics Office Hours have been filled on a first-come, first-served basis by other staff who responded to the invitation.

If you are still interested in meeting with [Name of participating leader] on [date], please contact me on that day, and we will do our best to accommodate you if possible. Your name will also be placed on a wait list so that we can schedule you on a priority basis for the next Quadrad Ethics Office Hours session, which will be held on [date and time]. Shortly before this event, you will receive an invitation confirming your appointment.

If you have a pressing ethical concern that cannot wait, I can ask [name], our facility's ethical consultation coordinator, to follow up with you. Let me know if you would like me to do so.

Best wishes,

[Quadrad Ethics Office Hours coordinator]