



Tear Sheet Topic: Transparency in Leadership Decisions

Leaders of health care organizations strongly influence the ethical environment and culture, which in turn influence employee behavior. Without proactive ethical leadership, ethical culture problems prevail despite the best intentions.

Ethical Leadership is one of the three core functions, along with Preventive Ethics and Ethics Consultation, of IntegratedEthics®. Together, these functions provide health care leaders with the practical tools and training they need to foster an ethical environment and culture that will make it easier for employees to “do the right thing.” The IntegratedEthics model of Ethical Leadership is organized around four compass points that are strongly associated with ethical culture:

1. Demonstrate that ethics is a priority.
2. Communicate clear expectations for ethical practice.
3. Practice ethical decision making.
4. Support your local ethics program.

Durham VAMC Increases the Transparency of Leadership Decisions

This article describes how an IE initiative, such as that implemented through an Ethical Leadership improvement project or ISSUES cycle, can apply the concepts of procedural justice to improve ethics quality across the facility.

When results of the 2010 IntegratedEthics Staff Survey (IESS) were tallied, management learned that many staff at Durham (NC) VA Medical Center did not understand the reasoning behind local resource allocation decisions. Believing that transparency in this area could be improved, then-facility Director Ralph Gigliotti, FACHE, alerted VISN leadership. As a result, the 2011 Leadership Development Institute (LDI) class was assigned to work on this topic across the VISN. This issue was considered especially important for several reasons. According to research on procedural justice, when employees do not understand how or why certain decisions are made, they might question resulting policies and practices and not feel as committed to the institution’s mission and priorities. Second, facility leadership were committed to creating an organizational environment that prioritized being ethical and transparent.

Through the IntegratedEthics (IE) Council, Mr. Gigliotti suggested that LDI participants initiate an ISSUES cycle (i.e., quality improvement methods applied to improve ethical practices) on improving

employee understanding of the decision-making process at Durham. “Our charge was to promote inclusion of employee input and transparency of ethical considerations in resource allocation,” said LDI graduate Shajuana McMillan, PharmD, member of Durham’s Preventive Ethics (PE) team and IE Program Officer, who coordinated the improvement effort. In response, the LDI team suggested inviting facility employees to meetings of the Resource Management Council (RMC), which makes decisions about filling positions and allocating funds. Leadership agreed.

Staff Attendance at Resource Management Council Meetings

The PE team sent invitations to all staff, accompanied by a form for supervisors to authorize their employees to attend the meeting. The invitations were well received by both clinical and non-clinical employees who represented different sectors of the medical center. Employees observed the meetings from a gallery and forwarded questions to RMC members. The questions were answered either right away or at the end of meeting. When the meeting was over, the observers offered feedback on an evaluation form.

“Based on the feedback we learned from observers that attended the RMC meetings, we know they grew in their appreciation of the complexities of the decision-making process and appreciated access to seeing how these decisions are made,” said Dr. McMillan.

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This exposure enabled more employees to understand the resource management process, such as how a service could request a new position. It may have also helped alleviate the impression that some services were favored over others. Furthermore, this process enabled employees to ask managers questions directly. “The process helped them recognize that they, too, have a voice with our leadership,” said Dr. McMillan. “Finally, it helped them realize that leadership has nothing to hide. This process provided an opportunity to staff, one that gave direct access to decision-makers and information used to make decisions.”

Even though the facility has changed leadership since the practice was instituted, employees are still invited to observe the RMC meetings, and they continue to accept.

Staff Attendance at Space Committee Meetings

Inspired by the practice of inviting employees to RMC meetings, leadership then thought about other ways to improve transparency in their decision making. For example, the Space Committee wanted to share the challenges it faced in approving requests for changes at this undersized facility. Therefore, members decided to open their monthly meetings so that staff would understand how space decisions were made, and could learn about the implications of Durham’s significant space deficit.

The facility Director’s office now sends out an all-employee e-mail inviting staff to attend the meetings. Employees whose services have submitted Space Committee Requests are especially encouraged to attend. The e-mail includes a form that employees submit to their supervisors for approval. There is also space to describe their interest in observing the Space Committee, or to comment on the meeting’s discussion.

“The response has been very positive,” said Morgan Jones, MSPH, former Staff Assistant to Durham’s Director/Facility Planner. “Employees from all services and levels are attending the meetings and observing how diligently

the Space Committee reviews the requests and tries to find a way to approve them. As a result, trust in the overall process of allocating space has improved, and the Space Committee environment has become more collegial.”

This access has even had an impact on the nature of requests to the Committee. Ms. Jones reports that since the committee has opened the meetings, services have shown an effort to maximize the use of their current space. For example, they now request interior improvements or efficiency reviews rather than simply asking for additional space.

Service Round Tables with Leadership

In further efforts to improve transparency and communication at Durham, DeAnne Seekins, MBA, the current facility Director, and her executive leadership team initiated Service Round Tables in January 2013 to meet with each service at their location to discuss facility issues, strategic plans, and service-specific concerns. All employees are invited to attend their service’s roundtable.

The roundtables have since grown into successful, productive meetings that provide two-way communication in a supportive environment. “Some services have already signed up for a second roundtable because they’ve enjoyed it so much,” said Ms. Jones. “People typically end the meeting by thanking leadership for putting this idea into action. They now have a better sense of what’s going on and the Director’s priorities. They also appreciate being heard.”

Other Communications Efforts

RMC and Space Committee meeting agendas, minutes, and recommendations are available on the All-Employee Shared Drive, along with leadership’s decisions regarding these recommendations. Minutes from other committee

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and council meetings are also shared if they do not violate privacy protection policies.

In addition, Ms. Seekins has encouraged Dr. McMillan to speak to services on ICARE values and other ethics concerns. For example, one service invited her to talk about improving ways to welcome new employees and prevent the spread of rumors. She has also provided overviews of the IE program.

Finally, in October 2012, the facility adopted an Ask Leadership program that enables any staff member to anonymously ask questions of leadership. The program yields about a dozen questions a month from staff at all levels and geographic locations. The ELT provides written responses that are shared with all staff through a monthly e-mail.

Overall Impact

How have all these practices improved the overall ethical environment at Durham? Dr. McMillan counts many ways. "I've been here 11 years, and have seen a lot of changes. There is now a huge understanding that transparency is important and exhibiting the principles of ICARE are important. Now the environment is characterized by trust. Relationships between employees and management have definitely improved."



DeAnne Seekins (center), Medical Center Director, Durham VAMC, discusses plans with a group of local VA Leadership Development Institute students.



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