



Tear Sheet Topic: Improving the Ethical Environment and Culture

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.

Salisbury Staff and Leadership Share Ideas Over Lunch

Employees at the W.G. (Bill) Hefner VA Medical Center in Salisbury, NC can now share concerns with the director and other quadrad members over lunch, thanks to a powerful “Lunch with the Director” program. All employees are invited to attend these lunches, which provide an informal environment for staff to share ideas with leadership and learn the “why” behind decisions. By promoting two-way dialogue, the lunches are intended to serve as a departure from the more traditional town hall meetings and e-mails used by previous leadership to communicate with front-line staff.

Improving communication between leaders and front line staff

The lunch program was developed by the Preventive Ethics (PE) Committee in response to two IntegratedEthics Staff Survey (IESS) findings that employees feared retaliation for reporting ethical concerns and believed managers could improve follow-up. With significant leadership turnover at the facility in the past five years, staff was unsure of the new leadership’s attitude toward reporting issues. The committee decided that informal lunches might serve as a safe environment where employees could discuss concerns with top leadership.

“Communication has not always been effective at our facility, and some stories had turned into ‘urban myths’ over the years,” said Theodore Moretz, PhD, IntegratedEthics (IE) Program

Officer. “The lunches allow staff to get to know new quadrad members and provide a forum to explain that ethical concerns matter and are being addressed. [The lunches] are also improving the communication between front-line staff and the executive team, and enabling staff to share ideas on best serving the needs of Veterans and employees.”

Since FY 13, seven lunches have been held. Each has been attended by two or more quadrad members and up to 60 employees. Susan Coburn, Preventive Ethics Coordinator, and Dr. Moretz facilitate the discussions. Topics are generated by participants of previous lunches, PE Committee members, ethics consultants, and questions from the facility’s “Ask Ethel” e-mail group/newsletter column. Topics with the highest potential impact are selected for consideration, and the IE Council approves the final topic. Occasionally, the committee has changed the topic to address emerging concerns.

Marketing the lunch program

The PE Committee manages the logistics for the program, including reserving the room, publicizing the event, and scheduling V-tel so that outpatient clinic staff can participate. To secure leadership attendance, lunches are scheduled at least a month in advance. The events are publicized through all-employee e-mails, the Salisbury monthly bulletin, the facility calendar, and colorful flyers. Leadership also asks supervisors to encourage staff to attend.

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“We addressed staff fear of reprisal for attending the lunches by clearly communicating in the publicity flyers and during the lunches that this was a safe, non-punitive method to communicate with top leadership,” explained Ms. Coburn. “We also changed the attendance log so that staff recorded their service line but not their name, and developed ground rules that were displayed prominently on the tables.”

Assessing overall accomplishments and next steps

Even though some staff felt the presence of middle management hindered their ability to speak freely, the general reaction to the program has been very positive. The quadrad has also acknowledged its value by following up on several suggestions that arose during the lunches, including:

- Revamping the employee newsletter
- Developing an incentive program where employees present “I Made a Difference” ribbons to others who exemplify I CARE values
- Prioritizing the goals and objectives of the Organizational Health Council
- Improving the process for communication about major events
- Developing a director’s blog



Susan Coburn, Preventive Ethics Coordinator, and Theodore Moretz, PhD, IE Program Officer,

A recent evaluation of the program indicated that 49 percent of the respondents believed the facility’s ethical climate had improved, and 100 percent recommended that the lunches continue.

“The lunches have been successful, and we plan to continue them at least quarterly,” said Dr. Moretz. “They have addressed the improvement opportunities identified in the IESS survey.”

To maintain interest and increase attendance, the PE Committee will continue to prioritize topics based on staff concerns. For example, members recently heard that staff wanted to learn more about conflict management. As a result, one of the topics planned for FY14 is “How to handle difficult people and tricky situations.”



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This article was originally published in issue 30 (May 2014) of *IntegratedEthics in Action*, a publication of VA's National Center for Ethics in Health Care. Learn more about VA's IntegratedEthics program at www.ethics.va.gov/integratedethics.