

A Brief Business Case for Ethics

A strong ethics program can produce many concrete benefits for a health care organization. It can contribute to an ethical culture and help to increase patient trust and satisfaction, improve employee morale, conserve resources, and save on costs. Here is some of the evidence that ethics contributes to value, that is, productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness in health care.

- **Increasing patient satisfaction.** When organizations support ethical health care practices—for example, by encouraging clinicians to actively engage patients in shared decision-making about their health care—patients feel respected [38], do better clinically, and say they're more satisfied with the care they receive [1 – 3, 24]. Satisfied patients are more likely to return for future care [44].
- **Increasing patient trust.** Ethical organizations are transparent, even about their mistakes. Patients want full disclosure about harmful errors in their health care, and full disclosure increases patient trust in the health care team [23] and organization [22]. Trust in the organization also increases patient loyalty [44].
- **Attracting and retaining ethical employees.** Employees want to be proud of the organization where they work [29]. For many prospective employees, organizational reputation is more important than salary when considering potential employers [40]. An ethical organization has a recruitment advantage and is more likely to attract and retain a high quality, ethical workforce [7, 36 – 37, 39]. Employee retention is associated with reduced turn over costs
- **Improving employee engagement and productivity.** When employees perceive that their workplace is ethical, they identify more closely with the organization [27], are prouder and more committed to the organization's priorities and goals [18 – 19], more satisfied and productive [4 – 6], have less absenteeism [25], lower attrition [20], have greater trust in decision makers, and rate supervisors and managers more positively [26].
- **Improving corporate citizenship among employees.** Employees who perceive that their organization is ethical are less likely to engage in retaliatory behaviors, such as theft of time or resources, to 'balance the scales of justice' [26, 28, 30].
- **Reducing employees' moral distress.** Moral distress occurs when employees feel unable to act in accordance with their professional obligations. Moral distress is associated with increased levels of burnout, and with decreased employee retention and quality of patient care [35, 41, 43]. Ethical environments can reduce the frequency and intensity of moral distress among employees [34, 42].
- **Enabling employees to be more proactive in addressing threats to the organization.** In ethical organizations, employees are more likely to speak up when they see problems and more confident that managers will follow up on concerns [32 – 33], enabling the organization to proactively address otherwise hidden and potentially costly risk situations.

- **Promoting patient-centered care supports efficiency, effectiveness, and value-based health care.** Effective ethics programs have been shown to improve quality of care, reduce length of stay, and reduce costs [8, 21]. Supporting patients' rights to limit or forgo life-sustaining treatments meets an important ethical standard and, at the same time, may reduce costs associated with unwanted care [9 – 11].
- **Improving accreditation reviews.** The Joint Commission includes accreditation standards explicitly pertaining to ethics, patient and family rights, and organizational responsibilities. A strong ethics program can help ensure that the organization meets or exceeds those standards [45].
- **Reducing ethics violations.** An effective ethics program can address ethics quality gaps and help prevent the sort of practices that can lead to ethics violations, findings of material weakness, or even sanctions or fines, and damage an organization's reputation [12, 28, 31].
- **Reducing risk of lawsuits.** Organizations that make strong commitments to ethical health care practices, such as being honest with patients, can reduce the risk of litigation and liability [13 – 15].
- **Sustaining corporate integrity.** Ambiguity about values and priorities is one of the major reasons that organizations depart from established industry norms and standards [16]. Making ethics a clear priority in corporate culture helps to ensure good business practices throughout the organization.
- **Safeguarding the organization's future.** Lack of an effective ethics program can seriously jeopardize an organization's reputation and even its survival [17]. Creating structures and processes by which an organization can hold itself accountable to its core values and to ethical practices is an investment in the organization's future.

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