Integrated Ethics® Supervisor Activity

Responding to Moral Distress and Acts of Moral Courage

OVERVIEW

This self-study activity will help mid-level managers and front-line supervisors respond empathetically and meaningfully to staff who express moral distress. Case examples and specific scripts will demonstrate a positive response to moral distress and acts of moral courage, and managers will have an opportunity to incorporate these techniques into their own responses to staff concerns.

Audience: Mid-level managers and front-line supervisors.

Time required: This self-study activity is designed to be completed in 90-120 minutes.

Learning objectives:

At the end of this activity, participants will be able to do all of the following:

- Define moral distress
- Use scripted responses when confronted with the moral distress of staff
- Formulate responses to moral distress based on the model described in this unit

Pre-work:

This self-study course can be used on its own. However, it builds on other training from NCEHC. Learners would gain additional experience with responding to ethical concerns by reviewing the course “How to follow up on ethics concerns” (facilitator guide, slides, handout). Additional training materials and behavior standards can be found in the Servant Leadership Toolkit from NCOD.

Optional Follow-up:

In order to change your management practices, it is important to take conscious steps to incorporate this approach into your day-to-day interactions with staff. If you have a coach or supportive supervisor, you may want to discuss with them what you have learned during this activity and how you propose implementing what you learned. On your own, consider taking the following steps:

1. Reflect on the examples presented during the training and your response to the scenarios. What are your personal take home points? Write these down.

2. Reflect on your work environment and your staff. What kind of situations or what actions on the part of your staff are likely to cause moral distress or what events in the past have caused moral distress? Briefly summarize these situations.
3. Based on your take home points (step 1 above), frame your response to one or more of the situations you identified in step 2 above. What would you say? How would you show empathy? How would you describe your solution to the issue? Make sure to include the points most important to you.

4. Keep this script and the tip sheet on page 18 at your workstation so you can refer to them when staff bring an issue forward. If possible, use these materials when responding to moral distress expressed by staff. If you don’t use them in the moment, pull them out and reflect on an interaction you have had as soon as practical after it takes place. Make note of where you can improve the next time in your response. Incorporate this learning into your personal script.

5. At least one time per month, set aside about 15 minutes to review this material and reflect on situations where you had an opportunity to use this technique. What did you do? How would you improve? Make note of these insights and include them in your reflection the next month. These monthly reflections are important to discuss with your coach if you have one. This kind of reflective learning can be scheduled during the same monthly review time when you pause to reflect on your performance and attainment of goals.

You may wish to share this technique and your behavior goals with your staff. Staff can help to keep you accountable. Explain to them the behavior you hope to display. Be explicit in the expectations you have of yourself with respect to responding to their moral distress. Invite them to bring their moral distress to your attention and to hold you accountable for the behavior you are trying to display. Ask them to tell you if you are not acting consistent with these expectations. When they flag your failures, be sure to thank them for it, preferably in public.
Responding to Moral Distress and Acts of Moral Courage

INTRODUCTION
In 2014, VA employees exposed VA’s failure to provide Veterans with timely access to health care. The disclosures brought to light instances where VA relied on data manipulation, workarounds and false reporting of patient wait times to appear compliant with access standards and performance expectations. The resulting scandal and accompanying media and Congressional attention brought needed leadership attention and resources to bear on the problem. However, it also resulted in significant harm to the reputational capital of VA and broke the bond of trust between VA and the Veterans served by it. Once damaged, reputation and trust are hard to regain. Going forward, VA must recognize and address the potential for ethical lapses when they first arise. This training explores one means for managers and front-line supervisors to help employees speak up and do the right thing for VHA and Veterans.

In an ideal organization, every employee would know the right actions to take, feel empowered to take those actions, and feel comfortable seeking support and guidance from supervisors and managers. Employees would also believe that they would suffer no retaliation for their actions and, indeed, would be rewarded for doing the right thing. In a health care organization, the ability to achieve high standards of quality, safety, and ethical behavior are advanced by employees embracing these beliefs. Top organizational leaders, managers, and front-line supervisors all have a role to play in ensuring that employees feel they can act on what they know is right. As the first line of interaction with employees and the ones to whom concerns, questions and issues are first raised, front-line supervisors and managers must cultivate in themselves the skill of empathetic listening, learn to acknowledge value conflicts, and hold themselves accountable for following up on ethics matters brought to them. In doing so, they can help create an environment where staff feel safe to bring problems forward.

This self-study activity provides examples of a manager’s response to moral distress.

MORAL DISTRESS and MORAL COURAGE
Moral distress occurs when employees feel unwilling or unable to act in a way that is consistent with their core values or professional obligations. This includes such

2 Ibid.
instances where their attempts to address the issue don’t result in its resolution. Barriers to action can be internal barriers like self-doubt or feelings of insecurity or can be rooted in external barriers such as a rigid hierarchy, lack of leadership support, or systems issues that are controlled elsewhere in the institution. Key hallmarks of moral distress are feelings of frustration, anger, guilt, anxiety or self-blame that arise from a clearly identified violation of core values that the individual feels unable to correct. Common causes of moral distress include a climate that fails to support speaking up about issues, poor team communication and teamwork, unaddressed concerns about patient safety, uncertainty about what is ethical, and conflicting values expressed in the workplace. Moral distress, particularly if it is repeated or sustained, can lead to burnout and difficulty retaining staff, to violence and bullying horizontally in the power structure, and to gaps in the care of patients.

Moral courage is one response to moral distress. It is defined as the personal capacity of an individual to overcome fear and be able to stand up for their core values. Speaking up to do what is right likely involves personal risk but the individual does it anyway. Personal risk may be interpersonal, the risk of losing friends or alienating colleagues, or professional such as the risk of alienating ones boss or other members of the organizational hierarchy who could retaliate against the employee and endanger their employment or ability to advance in the organization.

Supervisors and managers can help relieve moral distress by creating a climate in their unit that is open to discussion and dissent. In VA, there are a number of leadership development resources which can help leaders achieve this goal. These resources include the work of the NCOD and VA Center for Patient Safety to foster psychologically safe work environments where employees feel comfortable raising issues and concerns. Second, supervisors and managers can adopt the lessons taught in the IntegratedEthics Ethical Leadership model to demonstrate that ethics is a priority through such actions as talking about ethics and values, and regularly raising and

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6 Ibid.
discussing ethical concerns. Servant Leadership, also from NCOD, provides further tools and training on how to lead through values and support teamwork and effective team communication.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition to creating a general climate that promotes discussions of difficult topics, supervisors and managers can also have a direct impact on moral distress by offering a positive and supportive reaction to acts of moral courage from their staff. It is important to remember that how a supervisor reacts to a single act of moral courage doesn’t just impact that one event or the individual involved. A response may be witnessed or retold to others within the supervisory group and potentially across the institution.\textsuperscript{14} The actions taken in response to one event influence the creation of a positive environment— or can create a negative atmosphere if not handled effectively.

**RESPONDING EFFECTIVELY**

There are a myriad of techniques to help supervisors communicate effectively with staff about issues that are often difficult to discuss. These techniques include Crucial Conversations,\textsuperscript{15} approaches to difficult conversations such as CANDID\textsuperscript{16} and other step-by-step checklists.\textsuperscript{17} In this training, and in previous trainings released by NCEHC,\textsuperscript{18} we are using an approach that is informed by these resources but also incorporates insights from ethics literature and from VA facility directors who have been successful in creating a positive ethical environment and culture at their facilities. The features that distinguish this approach from the others is first, framing the discussion in terms of ethics by acknowledging the values and value conflicts inherent in the issue that has been brought forward. Second, this approach ensures that supervisors articulate a plan for following up on the concern and committing to closing the loop with the individual so they understand how the issue has been addressed. Transparency in raising, tracking and resolving issues are hallmarks of ethical organizations as well as of effective risk management programs in safety-conscious industries like nuclear energy.

A tip summary of this approach can be found on page 18. The elements are as follows:

**Thank the employee for sharing their moral distress or demonstrating moral courage.** It is important to remember that moral distress involves strong emotions. You may face anger, frustration, fear and self-blame. Acknowledge the emotions in a neutral way such as using an “I” approach (I have often felt the same, I understand, I too am frustrated by such…) Make sure you acknowledge and show appreciation for their willingness to talk

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\textsuperscript{16} Gallagher, R. How to Tell Anyone Anything: Breakthrough Techniques for Handling Difficult Conversations at Work. AMACOM, 2009.


\textsuperscript{18} For example, *How to Follow Up on Ethical Concerns* (*Handout, Facilitator Guide, Slides*).
about the issue despite the emotions. It may help to move through emotions by getting
them to talk about the triggering event in a neutral, fact based way before you move on.

**Demonstrate listening skills and show empathy.** Be curious, ask questions, and cultivate
an attitude of discovery. Not only do you want to understand what happened, you want
to be sure you understand the employee’s view of what’s wrong and their perspective
on what needs to change. If you don’t understand their problem, you are unlikely to
solve it appropriately. Acknowledge what you have heard and summarize it back to the
individual and make sure you tie the issue or concern to a value.

**Tie the issue or concern to a value.** In summarizing the issue back to the employee,
explicitly acknowledge the values at play in the situation.

**Be transparent about your role and clarify expectations.** To build trust with staff, leaders
must live up to their commitments. In this context, this means you need to be
transparent about what you will likely be able to do and, as important, what you can’t.
Ideally, you want to focus on solutions that are within your sphere of control that you
can personally solve. However, many institutional causes of moral distress are outside
of your direct control. All you may be able to do is raise the concern further up the chain
of command. You need to acknowledge this. It is important to set expectations up front
so that the employee doesn’t feel you broke your commitment when your ability to make
change is limited.

If the privacy of others is at stake, explain that the employee will learn when the matter
has been reviewed and appropriate action taken, even though details cannot be shared.
This point is also about transparency. Ideally you will want to be completely transparent
about how you worked the issue and resolved the concern. But sometimes when the
issue involves the conduct and behavior of another employee, the privacy rights of that
individual must be protected. As such, your ability to close the loop with the employee
who raised a concern may be curtailed. Be upfront about this point. Acknowledge you
won’t be able to provide details and that you will only report when the issue has been
thoroughly examined and resolved. Do ask the employee to speak with you again if the
behavior in question continues so they are assured that you aren’t shutting the door to
further communication.

**Tell the employee who will be responsible for following up, describe the process you
expect to take place in follow-up, and how long it will take, inform the employee how
they should expect to hear about the outcome.** Following up on ethical concerns is a
key step in building an environment where staff believe they work in an ethical
organization. This involves clarifying expectations up front about the process to be used
and then closing the loop with the employee so they know what happened.

An effective approach for a particular supervisor is the one that feels comfortable for
their style of communication and the relationship they have with staff. As you review the
exercises in this lesson, ask yourself, “How can I adapt this approach to work for me?
What phrases, words, and scripts can I use in my interactions with staff?”
TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Scenario 1: While reading the scenario, try to identify the source of moral distress.

As you get up from your desk for the third time this afternoon to walk around the corner to retrieve material from the central printer, you think, “dumb, dumb, dumb.” Some bureaucrat in VACO has decided that desktop printers cost too much money, so everyone is using a central printer. You wonder, did anyone figure the cost of your time into that analysis? Not likely. As you arrive at the printer, you find one of your nurses at the printer nearly in tears. She says, “I don’t know what to do. I am so frustrated!” “Oh no,” you respond, “What’s so upsetting?” “Well” she continues, “since we all have to use this same printer I have to walk down a floor in the middle of a patient exam to pick up these forms—Mr. Johnson is 90 years old and if I want to get these releases completed, I have to leave him alone on the table for 10 minutes! And then I get here and see all these other forms sitting here for who knows how long?” “Oh, yeah, I hear you. That does sound like a problem,” you respond. She continues “I mean, look at this one, it is full of medical information about this Veteran, with his name splashed across every page,” emphasizing the detail with a jab of her finger at the offending paper, “And I don’t have time to clean this up. I need to get back to Mr. Johnson. If he tries to get up off the exam table he could fall and injure himself.” You nod, “what do you think we should do?” “I put up this sign,” she points to a piece of paper hanging on the wall that reads, Protect Personal Information – Don’t Leave it at the Printer! “But it hasn’t made any difference, and unless we get more printers we’ll still be leaving patients alone while we get forms all the time.”

Supervisor’s Response

The change to the printers is frustrating for all of us, and the patient safety implications are very troubling. This must be happening to nurses and physicians all over the facility. Thank you for trying to fix this problem and for letting me know how much it’s bothering you. You’re right, we have to try to fix this problem. I know that VACO is trying to save money on printers, but the privacy and patient safety implications haven’t been thought through. I think I need to talk to the chief of staff and maybe we can bring in the Preventive Ethics Coordinator. There is a systems issues here and a failure to meet standards of patient safety, as well as privacy and confidentiality. I’ll let you know next week if I have been able to set a process in motion to look at this problem and offer solutions to it. If we get a workgroup going on addressing this problem, I think it would be great if you would be willing to participate. I don’t want to keep you from your patient any longer, I’ll shred these forms, and you have my OK to shred any personal information left on the printer for more than a few minutes. That is a short-term solution to one problem. The patient safety issue will be harder to address, but I’ll work with the leadership to find a solution. Does that sound okay to you?

Questions

1. Review the supervisor’s response against the tips included in the worksheet on the next page. Copy the sentences or details from the supervisor’s response into the
space provided on the worksheet. Did the supervisor hit all of the points? Was anything left out?

2. How would you feel if you were given this response when you raised an issue about Veterans privacy and confidentiality? If you wouldn’t be satisfied with this response, what would you say differently?

3. On a separate piece of paper, draft a response in your own words that incorporates a majority of the tips included in the worksheet.
**Worksheet**

In the table below, fill out the sentence from the supervisor response that corresponds to each tip.

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**Scenario 2: While reading the scenario, try to identify the source of moral distress**

You are a nurse manager. You’re headed down to the cafeteria with one of your nurses to grab lunch. She rambles for a while about how nice it is to participate in events to support fellow Veterans, particularly during the holidays. She noted that she was happy to see that the General Post Fund was giving gift cards to needy Veterans for the canteen. You nod and agree. She then says, “You know, it kind of upset me to hear from Anthony today that he had received one of those gift cards. He headed over to the main building ahead of us to shop during his lunch break.” Anthony is another nurse in your area. And although he is a Veteran too and a patient at the medical center, his employment with the VA precludes him from participating in the gift card program.

**Supervisor’s Response**

Oh, that is interesting: Thanks for telling me. I didn’t know Anthony had received a gift card. I suspect it was hard to tell me something that was critical of him, and I appreciate you raising it. I want to keep it as private as I can and would ask you to do the same. I don’t know exactly what happened and we want to protect Anthony’s privacy and due process rights. I understand your concern that it may be a conflict of interest for Anthony as an employee to have received a gift card — even though as a Veteran patient he may have had the right to receive one. I need to find out a few more facts before I can take appropriate actions. I want to review the rules governing the use of the General Post Fund and speak with Voluntary Services and Anthony. I may need to speak with regional counsel as well. I’ll give you a status update by this time next week. I suspect this is a misunderstanding and I think we can easily clear it up. In the meantime, I don’t want you to be worried about it. I’ll be working to address the issue.

**Questions**

1. Review the supervisor’s response against the tips included in the worksheet on the next page. Copy the sentences or details from the supervisor’s response into the space provided on the worksheet. Did the supervisor hit all of the points? Was anything left out?

2. How would you feel if you were given this response when you raised an issue about a colleague? If you wouldn’t be satisfied with this response, what would you say differently?

3. On a separate piece of paper, draft a response in your own words that incorporates a majority of the tips included in the worksheet.
**Worksheet**

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Scenario 3: While reading the scenario, try to identify the source of moral distress.

You are the public affairs officer at a metropolitan 1A facility in a big media market. Which means you are a busy person! You and the quality manager just got off the phone with VACO about a media request for information on panel size and Veteran utilization of primary care in each panel at your medical center. The quality manager turns to you and says, “Were we just told to lie to the press? I heard them say that it sounded like too much trouble to pull the data. I agree that the data will be hard to understand without the appropriate context and could be misunderstood. But the data itself is easy to get a hold of. I thought we had an obligation to tell the truth and promote transparency with the public? I am not going to sleep well tonight if we have to call back the reporter and tell her what VACO just told us to say.”

Public Affairs Officer’s Response

I don’t feel right about it either. I’m glad you said something. I know we want to protect VA’s reputation against a potential misunderstanding by the press. But lying or hiding information to achieve that end doesn’t sound right to me. We are going to have to talk to our chain of command about this. But, you know, let’s take a problem-solving approach and see if we can’t arrive at a solution that works for everyone. First, do you think you can pull the requested data? (Listen to the response.) Ok, also, what about explaining what the data means? How do you suggest we go about that to try to avoid misinterpretation? (Listen to the response) Ok, while you do all that, I will talk to the Deputy Director about a plan of action. My preference is that we send all of the material to VACO with a recommendation that they release it. At the same time, we can be transparent with the reporter to let her know what we have done. She can always FOIA the information instead of making a media request and we can remind her of that option too. How soon can you get the information together, by tomorrow afternoon? I will try to get in front of the Deputy Director today and let you know what we decide. Don’t worry, I think we will get through this with our dignity intact.

Questions

1. Review the supervisor’s response against the tips included in the worksheet on the next page. Copy the sentences or details from the supervisor’s response into the space provided on the worksheet. Did the supervisor hit all of the points? Was anything left out?
2. If you were the quality manager, how would you feel about receiving this response? If you wouldn’t be satisfied with this response, what would you say differently?
3. On a separate piece of paper, draft a response in your own words that incorporates a majority of the tips included in the worksheet.
**Worksheet**

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Scenario 4: While reading the scenario, try to identify the source of moral distress.

You are the head of sterile processing at a 1C facility. Although other facilities in the VISN have had large scale disclosure events linked to problems with sterile processing, you are proud that no such event occurred under your watch.

A front-line technician bursts through your open door and launches into a tirade, “Do you have any idea what’s been going on around here for the last two weeks? I can’t stand it anymore!”

“Whoa, ok,” you respond. “Something has made you upset. Tell me what’s going on, I want to hear.”

Calmer, the technician continues, “Did you tell Ben and Pete to ignore the new chemical indicators? I tried to tell them what they were doing was wrong. But when I did, they said that you had told them to do it.”

Puzzled, you say “wow, I’m not sure I know exactly what you are talking about. Tell me more. What are they doing?”

The employee explains, “Well, you know the new chemical indicators we have to use? Each one is supposed to change color when the package is sterile. But that new batch of indicators don’t always change. Sometimes only some of the packets in a batch change color. Ben and Pete said that when they told you about it, you said to get it to work and that we have to keep up our volume so we can support timely surgery for Veterans. Well, they’ve just been ignoring those failed indicators. They’ve been using these packages to stock the sterile trays for surgery. I don’t think it’s right. We don’t know if the indicators are bad or our sterile process is bad. I can’t be sure those packages really are sterile. I know we have to keep up our volume, but we could be putting patients at risk.”

You lean back in your chair and exhale slowly, stunned. What have you done? You remember saying those words to Ben and Pete but you had meant for them to fix the problem, not ignore it. The employee in front of you just accused you of deliberately putting patients at risk.

Supervisor’s Response

Wow, I’m shocked. I really want to thank you for telling me about this. It’s my fault for not being clear. I meant for Ben and Pete to figure out what was going wrong and fix the root problem, not just ignore the failed indicators! Let’s go talk to Ben and Pete. We need to stop the line on this process right now. You can work with them to pull all of the trays stocked since the problem started. I know they’ve been using the biological test controls every day, but that isn’t good enough. We need redundant safety controls. Once you guys start pulling the problem trays, I will go talk to the head of Surgery and alert the Chief of Staff to the problem. Once I get done, I’ll come back and help with the inventory. We need to know if any of the trays have been used for procedures already. We will need a tally and a recommendation about whether to trigger the large-scale review and disclosure process. Let’s convene tonight before everyone leaves to check
in on our progress and again tomorrow morning at 10AM. Boy what a mess. It would be worse if you hadn’t brought this to me when you did. Thank you — don’t ever hesitate to bring something important like this to me, especially if it involves patient safety. Veterans are always our first concern — you did the right thing.

Questions

1. Review the supervisor’s response against the tips included in the worksheet on the next page. Copy the sentences or details from the supervisor’s response into the space provided on the worksheet. Did the supervisor hit all of the points? Was anything left out?

2. If you were the employee, how would you feel about receiving this response? If you wouldn’t be satisfied with this response, what would you say differently?

3. On a separate piece of paper, draft a response in your own words that incorporates a majority of the tips included in the worksheet.
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REFLECT

You’ve now considered four scenarios in which a supervisor responded to moral distress. Take the time now to reflect on your own past work experience and think about how you have responded to moral distress in the past and how you can improve in the future, by completing the following three steps.

1. Identify a time when you responded to moral distress expressed by an employee and reflect on how you responded.
2. Assess your recollection of your response against the checklist included on page 18.
3. Reflect on what you could do better next time.
TIPS FOR RESPONDING

A. Thank the employee for sharing their moral distress.

B. Demonstrate listening skills and show empathy.

C. Tie the issue or concern to a value.

D. Be transparent about your role and clarify expectations.

E. If the privacy of others is at stake, explain that the employee will learn when the matter has been reviewed and appropriate action taken, even though details cannot be shared.

F. Tell the employee who will be responsible for following up.

G. Describe the process you expect to take place in follow-up, and how long it will take.

H. Inform the employee how they should expect to hear about the outcome.