Demonstrate that Ethics Matters to You:
Model a Regular Discussion of Ethics

Goals and Objectives

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

1. Formalize processes for encouraging ethical behavior and ethical leadership in supervisors and managers.
2. Help leaders learn, use and train others in key EL concepts.
3. Demonstrate to supervisors and their teams that leaders at the facility believe ethics is important, and are invested in creating a workplace where all managers and staff believe that ethics is important.
4. Provide ways for facility leaders to engage employees in the process of creating and maintaining a high-performing organization.

Learning objectives

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

- Articulate the critical role that leaders at all levels have in shaping the ethical culture of the organization.
- Embody ethical leadership through talking about ethics and demonstrating that ethics is important within your unit or team.
- Inspire your team to speak up about ethics topics.
- Depending on what materials you choose to discuss – specific ethics topics or a more general book – you may also expect to learn about ethics or leadership topics such as how leaders embody ethical leadership through decision making and actions, the importance of mentoring for building commitment to ethical leadership, or ways to inspire supervisors to encourage their reports to embrace ethical practice.
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 VA facilities. This action kit offers suggestions for how to engage supervisors and managers throughout your facility in reflection on how they can be role models of ethical leadership. Developing EL skills in supervisors throughout your facility is a way to improve ethical culture. Supervisors and managers are in a position to reinforce organizational values through regular contact with frontline employees. By teaching EL skills to managers and supervisors, executive leaders can both demonstrate their own commitment to ethical behavior and create a cadre of leaders who will do the same with their teams. As noted in *Ethical Leadership: Fostering an Ethical Environment and Culture*, holding "a regularly scheduled meeting to discuss ethics" is a way to prove ethics matters to you, and one that allows leaders the opportunity to "learn how commonly held their beliefs are . . . to clarify misconceptions that may exist among staff . . . to develop and apply a shared set of values to guide behavior within the organization."

In a number of facilities with strong ethics practices, facility leadership routinely discuss ethics with supervisors and staff. This action kit describes two approaches developed and successfully deployed at the Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center in Iron Mountain, MI: yearly ethics training for supervisors and a quarterly book club. The yearly ethics training is a one-to-two-hour training in which the facility director discusses general ethics, compliance and privacy topics with supervisors. Topics change from year to year based on suggestions from the IE advisory board. For the book club, the director asks supervisors to read a book on a topic related to building relationships and doing the right thing. Supervisors then write a one-to-two-page response tied to the topic of the book or an issue that the book speaks to in the medical center. The facility director discusses the book at the director’s staff meeting and town hall meetings. When asked why he holds book club meetings, Director James W. Rice replied, “We feel that by practicing the strategies outlined in these books, supervisors (and all employees) will treat the patients and each other with more respect, be less inclined to act in an unethical manner, and ultimately a higher ethical culture will exist.”

**Brief description:**

This action kit describes two systematic approaches for engaging supervisors in talking about ethics using guided discussions. By staking out time for discussing ethics with supervisors and managers, leaders can reinforce a facility-wide commitment to ethics, demonstrate that ethics matters to them, and encourage staff to discuss ethics in the open and often. This action kit explores two options for systematic approaches to ethics discussions: a topical ethics meeting and a book club.
1. Topical Ethics Meeting

A topical ethics meeting is one of two recurring meetings about ethics that have been used successfully at Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center and other facilities. Based on real experiences of real facilities, we offer a method for the facility director and quadrad to engage supervisors in discussions on ethics that are adaptable to local settings. At Oscar G. Johnson VAMC, the topical ethics meeting was held once a year, but the timing and frequency of the meeting are flexible and can be held more often. Following the steps below and adapting them to your needs will help in realizing the above goals and learning objectives. The plan for the meeting follows four steps: 1) How to Find an Ethics Topic; 2) Develop Your Agenda; 3) Leading a Discussion; and 4) Evaluation and Improvement. It also includes an optional 10 to 15 minute exercise for mid-level managers. The meeting is intended to be 30 to 45 minutes long, but the agenda and meeting length can be varied to suit the needs of your particular facility.

Step 1. How to Find an Ethics Topic

For this meeting, you should focus on a specific ethics topic. If the meeting attendees can easily and clearly connect the discussion topic to something that is important to the facility or to the VA nationally, they are more likely to consider the training useful and important. For instance, the wait time controversy was used by facility directors to hold values-based conversations on being an advocate for Veterans and integrity. In looking for topics that speak to employees, the following approaches may be helpful:

1. Generate topics connected to issues at your facility by asking for suggestions at IE council meetings, town halls, director’s staff meetings and other regular meetings.
2. Consider areas for improvement based on survey data from the ethics or organizational culture questions in the All-Employee Survey.
3. Review topics that the National Center for Ethics in Health Care (NCEHC) has covered (available on the IntegratedEthics homepage)
4. Use the NCEHC Value of the Month activity, which provides a template and topics to discuss.
5. Adapt stories and reports from VA nationally or the health care field in general.
6. Ask your ethics consultation team to share concerns that have been raised repeatedly in ethics consultations or ethics issues raised by staff members.

Step 2. Develop Your Agenda

An agenda for each meeting provides a way to include others during the planning of your meeting. Your agenda should include:

1. Brief opening comments (1-2 minutes) to set the tone for the meeting, such as:
   - Why is it important to talk about ethics? (e.g., to help build a healthy organizational culture where ethics concerns and issues are routinely raised and discussed. Problems at this facility can only be solved if staff and supervisors are comfortable raising them.)
Why is it important for leaders to demonstrate this behavior, to talk about ethics? (e.g., leaders have a powerful influence on what is seen as acceptable and unacceptable behavior within their organization. Modeling discussions about ethics and reacting positively when others talk about ethics establishes this as an organizational norm at the facility level and within the work unit.)

2. A brief introduction or explanation of the topic to be discussed (5-10 minutes) – your main take-home point(s) should be encapsulated in these remarks:
   - What is the topic? How is it ethics? – see the list of ethics domains and topics if you aren’t sure what is included in ethics in health care. Describe or link the topics to an ethics standard or behavioral expectations in VA related to this topic. I CARE values and core characteristics can be used to frame behavioral expectations. Ethical standards may include such standards as ethical leadership standards (see Ethical Leadership: Fostering an Ethical Environment and Culture or American College of Healthcare Executives), health care professional standards (see for example AMA or ANA), or may be ethics policies, guidance and/or standards from VHA or similar standard-setting bodies.
   - To help participants see why the topic should matter to them, be sure to state your perspective on why this topic is important to Veterans, VA and/or your facility.

3. An open discussion (10-20 minutes):
   - Have a few questions on hand to prompt discussion if it doesn’t occur spontaneously. Questions should be tied to the specific topic, but may take an approach such as:
     - How does the topic relate to our responsibility toward Veterans?
     - How does it relate to our responsibility toward one another?
     - How does it relate to standards of ethical behavior in VA or at this facility?
     - How does it relate to a specific VA value or characteristic?
     - How does it relate to what we could do better at this facility?
     - How could we apply this or make it better or adapt it for our facility?

4. Closing remarks (5-10 minutes):
   - Summarize the discussion
   - Relate the discussion to your main take-home points
   - Highlight follow-up actions or give directions on expected follow-up, including both your actions and theirs

A sample agenda is also included in the appendix for further reference.
Step 3. Leading a Discussion

Holding meetings with supervisors focusing on ethics serves several purposes. It helps demonstrate executive leaders’ commitment to ethics through their willingness to devote time and effort to discussing ethical issues. It can be a forum in which leadership asks supervisors what issues are on their minds, thus helping them to feel that they are in a safe place to air these concerns. And it is a place where leadership models how to discuss ethics, so managers and supervisors can replicate the process with their own staff. IE staff can support leadership in this and all other aspects of the meeting; however, leaders should keep in mind that personally leading an ethics meeting strongly conveys to attending staff that ethics is a leadership priority. If you would like more information about what to say, or how to approach leading the meeting, Ethical Leadership Tips from NCEHC offers broad and specific information about how to discuss ethics.

Step 4. Evaluation and Improvement:

An intervention that is not measured in some way is at risk of not achieving its goals. In order to ensure the best possible outcomes from ethics meetings, leaders should seek to collect information about the meeting, and then ensure that any required or suggested follow-up occurs. Some ideas for evaluation and follow-up are listed below:

1. Ask supervisors to create an action plan for how they will follow up with their teams, as White River Junction VAMC did after having all supervisors complete the Ethical Leadership Self-Assessment.
2. Ask supervisors to discuss the meeting topic or other ethics topics with their teams during regular staff meetings, passing down the practice and information all the way to front-line staff, as practiced at Syracuse VAMC, White River Junction VAMC, and Chalmers P. Wylie VA Ambulatory Care Center.

In addition, leadership should consider a mechanism to gather feedback from participants to help future meetings run more effectively. For instance, as participants prepare to leave the meeting, the leader could hand them a card or handout with a link to a brief online survey, and ask them to help improve the process by completing the survey. The survey could ask two to four questions, such as:

1. Did you find the topic of this meeting relevant? Y/N
2. What topics would you like to see covered in later meetings?
3. What actions on the part of the leader would help further promote candid conversation?

Step 5. Debrief with the IE Council

At the next IE council meeting be sure to share any pertinent information you may have learned. Topics you may want to cover include what aspects of the meeting were successful, lessons learned, and any suggestions for improving the timing or structure of the topical ethics meeting.
Follow up Activity: 10-15 Minutes on Ethics for Mid-Level Supervisors

It is important that the focus on ethics not be confined to managers at higher levels, but be distributed throughout the supervisory structure of an organization. If possible, managers attending higher-level ethics meetings should be asked to follow up by holding short meetings of 10 to 15 minutes with their own work units.

As with the larger meetings, the goals of these follow-up meetings are to demonstrate that ethics is important to managers, reinforce the importance of talking about ethics, and explore ethical issues relevant to the work unit. When holding such meetings, the short time allotment means that topics should be focused, so the meeting does not devolve into general venting. This can be achieved by soliciting topics in advance from the work unit and choosing one from among them. This also has the benefit of building interest in the meeting. Higher-level managers may want to assign topics to mid-level managers, allowing them to focus the various parts of the facility on a particular ethics topic, but allowing the staff considerable freedom in the actual discussions.

Sample Agenda:

1. Introduce topic, explaining the concept or ethics topic (3-5 minutes)
2. Open topic to discussion (3-5 minutes)
3. Conclude, tying the topic to the everyday work environment and VA core values (2-5 minutes)
2. Book Group

A book group is another way to discuss ethics with managers. The book club works best when it highlights larger values, such as serving Veterans or creating a safe environment for employees. Even using a portion of a book as a case study or starting point for ethics discussion can be a valuable intervention. If the culture at your facility does not seem comfortable with ethics discussions, the book group may be a suitable way to start small and build up. With the authority they hold, leaders can establish small book groups even in the face of resistance and then invite others to attend as time goes on. Assigned books and the discussions that follow can have the important effect of helping managers to see outside their usual perspectives, and show them how their actions affect the larger organization and its mission.

The book group works best when it includes clear participation by the members. This can be achieved either in an in-person discussion or by asking supervisors to write a response to the book and submit it to leadership, as was successfully implemented at Oscar G. Johnson VAMC. If time permits, having a discussion and then soliciting written reflections allows for additional emphasis on ethics.

The final step of this process is also the most important one: following up with the larger community. In addition to tapping supervisors to participate in the book club, leadership needs to make clear how these books tie in to larger VA values, and how reading them helps contribute to a facility in which Veterans get the best possible care. Completing this step makes the book club meaningful to participants and the facility at large.

1. How to Choose Books

Books need not be narrowly focused on ethics, but can be tailored to a specific need or goal. For example, Oscar G. Johnson VAMC chose to discuss *The Carrot Principle* when external AES results suggested that they could be doing a better job with praise and employee recognition. BOOKS24x7 on TMS provides free access to numerous books, many addressing ethics topics, for all VA employees. Some suggestions for books that have been successfully used in the Oscar G. Johnson VAMC program:

1. *The Loudest Duck* by Laura Liswood. Examines the value of diversity and understanding how to work best with people with diverse experiences.
2. *Difficult Conversations* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen. Presents a step-by-step process for having difficult conversations in a way that leads to more successful outcomes.
3. *Switch – How to Change Things When Change is Hard* by Chip and Dan Heath. Discusses why people resist change, even when it would be positive, and how to overcome that resistance.
5. *If Disney Ran Your Hospital: 9½ Things to do Differently* by Fred Lee. A perspective on hospital assessment and improvement based on patient and staff loyalty and customer experience.

6. *Eat That Cookie* by Liz Jazwiec. On the benefits of creating a positive workplace in difficult places (the ER in particular) and difficult times.

### 2. Leading a Discussion

This action kit recommends three possible approaches to leading the book group discussion. You may employ all three, or choose the one that best fits the book you are reading (e.g., a book with a lot of case studies might benefit from a storytelling approach). You may also, as a leader, be more comfortable with one approach than another. Your comfort as the discussion leader helps to signal your authentic investment in the meeting. Discussing values, discussing the approaches of others to similar problems, and talking about particular events, cases or stories have all been used by directors to demonstrate that ethics is a priority. The approach you choose depends on your personal preference and the books you have chosen to discuss, and should be a stepping stone to talking about the book and book group in larger settings.

**Value-driven.** Introduce the major values or major perspectives of the book and explore them, e.g., what are the underlying values expressed? Do you agree with them? What is the author’s perspective on service?

**Text-driven.** Discuss lessons, anecdotes, approaches and other specifics from the book, e.g., what did you think of the author’s main point? How could we apply the author’s lessons to our facility, service area or VA as a whole?

**Storytelling.** Connect lessons from the book to experiences, cases or news stories, e.g., can you think of a time when you experienced something similar? Let’s explore the approach of this book based on the following event, which occurred here, at another facility, or in another healthcare setting.

### 3. Responses/Assignments/Assessments

A key component of the Oscar G. Johnson VAMC book club is the use of short one-to-two-page responses that managers and supervisors turn in to the director. The purpose of these responses is to encourage managers and leaders to think about how the book’s lessons might apply to their own practice. For example, after reading *Difficult Conversations*, the director asked each manager to provide an example of a difficult conversation that he or she had had, explain what they had done, and discuss what they might do differently after reading the book. Reading the written responses allows the director to gauge whether the choice of text was relevant to employees and whether managers are fully engaging with the process. The responses also help the director see which aspects of the book spoke to the supervisors, thus providing more information for drafting a follow-up for a larger audience.
4. Following Up

Follow-up is essential to the overall success of this intervention. It allows the director to frame the book and the book group within larger themes and values, making it meaningful to managers and to the staff of the facility at large. At Oscar G. Johnson VAMC, this occurred at the director’s staff meeting; however, follow-up could also occur at a town hall or another large gathering of staff members. Follow-up should be informed by book group discussions and take into account the plans and comments submitted by managers in their responses to the book. This lets the staff and managers know that leadership is invested in the process of improving ethics quality and in listening to what employees have to say.

Pitfalls

The facility that pioneered these strategies did not report encountering resistance to either effort. But since every facility is different, you may anticipate some resistance or non-acceptance. In case of such barriers, it may help to follow these tips:

1. **Build momentum slowly.** Start with a small group of senior staff you believe will be most receptive. Ideally, change leaders at your facility would be included among this group. Once this small group is comfortable with the approach, expand the circle. While developing momentum, be sure to talk about these discussions and the topics covered during staff meetings and town halls. This can help to create interest among staff and other leaders and make it easier to find additional supervisors willing to join the discussions. Once other leaders are comfortable with the approach, invite them to make remarks about the discussions during the larger public meetings in order to further build engagement and support.

2. **Let your quadrad lead.** Inform the quadrad that discussing ethics and values on an ongoing basis is important to you, but that how you achieve this is up to the group. This action kit offers two approaches. Let the quadrad know you are happy to follow their suggestions, while encouraging them to develop an approach that works for the culture at your facility.

3. **It starts with Veterans.** Connect the first few discussions explicitly to the VA mission to serve Veterans. Use Veterans’ stories to kick off the discussion or illustrate the points you are making. Despite cynicism and disengagement, most staff and leaders remain strongly committed to the VA mission. This is a way to get them on board with what you are doing from the start.
Appendix: Sample Agenda
Topical Ethics Meeting

Agendas will likely change in emphasis and time allotment from meeting to meeting, since some topics may require more explanation and introduction (e.g., the 14 Principles of Ethical Conduct) or be a more fruitful topic to share experiences and generate group discussion (e.g., dealing with difficult conversations). The sample agenda below offers one approach to discussing a broad ethical improvement strategy.

1. Brief opening comments to set the tone for the meeting:
   - We’re here today to help build a healthy organizational culture in which ethics concerns and issues are routinely raised and discussed. Solving problems is key to providing Veterans with the best possible care. We can only solve problems if staff and leaders are comfortable raising them. As leaders, we have a powerful influence on what is seen as acceptable behavior and what is seen as unacceptable behavior. Modeling discussions like these about ethics, and reacting positively when others talk about ethics, establishes this as an organizational norm.

2. Introduce topic: What does it mean to take a “Fresh Eyes Approach” to an ethics topic?
   - Explain the concept of the “fresh eyes” approach and the various ways it can be implemented to identify opportunities to improve ethics practice (e.g., a leader looking at a different area or process than usual, asking new employees for their unvarnished opinions).
   - Explain the benefits of talking with the real experts – i.e., staff – who are exposed to the day-to-day challenges and barriers of a given process. Staff often have great solutions that leadership might not otherwise consider. Tapping into staff expertise is one way leadership strives to bring fresh ideas to support its decision making.
   - Offer an example that explains the importance of the approach. This might come from your own past experience, your facility, another VA facility, a private hospital or a research hospital.
   - Connect the example to values (e.g., taking a “fresh eyes approach” helps us to stay focused on doing the right thing, avoiding harm and providing the best care we can). Or connect to I CARE values, such as Respect and Excellence.

3. Open the meeting to discussion. Ask questions that elicit both practical information and opinions:
   - Now that we have described the “fresh eyes approach” to identifying opportunities to improve ethics practice, think about when you have applied it yourself or seen it used, either here at this facility or elsewhere.
Let’s hear these examples…

Did that experience lead to changes, or did nothing come of it? Why do you think the effort succeeded or failed?

What might have made it more successful?

Where do you think a successful approach could be best instituted in your work area?

4. Close the meeting by asking for feedback and discussing how your supervisors will take this information and relate it to their teams.