IntegratedEthics® Ethical Leadership Activity

IntegratedEthics® Compass Point One: Demonstrate That Ethics Is a Priority

How to Follow Up on Ethical Concerns
Handout: Tips for Responding to an Ethical Concern

a. Remember to thank the employee for raising the ethics issue or concern.

b. Describe the ground rules for your discussion. These can include:
   • All ideas will be listened to with respect.
   • All discussions will be held confidential when possible. When, to resolve an issue,
     confidentiality cannot be maintained, explain what information will be divulged and to whom.
   • The employee will experience no retaliation on the basis of anything that is said during the
     session.

c. Clarify your role up front, which is to learn about ethics issues or concerns that staff might have
   and address them as appropriate. Be optimistic that acceptable solutions will be found which will
   result in a more positive ethics environment and culture at the facility.

d. Demonstrate listening skills and show empathy to make participation worthwhile. These skills
   include reflective listening, seeking input and active listening. Be aware of, and minimize, any
   verbal or nonverbal cues that may come across as domineering or judgmental.

e. Tie the issue or concern to a value. (“I am very glad you brought this to my attention. Issues like
   this are important because…it reminds us of our priorities to serve Veterans…to treat each other
   with respect…to be respectful stewards of public money…”)

f. Model humility. When appropriate, acknowledge that you don’t have all the information right now,
   and you (or others you assign) will have to find out more.

g. Tell the employee who or what group or committee will be assigned to follow up on the issue.

h. Describe the process you expect to take place in follow-up. While in some cases the full process
   may not yet be immediately clear, at least describe the immediate next steps for each concern.

i. Describe how long follow-up is likely to take.

j. Inform the employee how he/she should expect to hear about the outcome of the further action. For
   example, the employee could be:
   • contacted directly to be involved in further exploration (such as when an ethics consult is
     warranted);
   • informed directly of the outcome; or
   • briefed through a summary that will be discussed and circulated in the facility, using a standing
     mechanism (e.g., topic at the next town hall, article in an ethics newsletter, notice in daily
     announcements). In such cases, the employee should also be informed directly about the
     outcome of the concern they raised.

k. If the ethical concern involves an issue in which the privacy of others needs to be maintained (such
   as a personnel or patient concern), explain that:
   • patients and other employees have a right to privacy in many circumstances;
   • the employee will learn when the review or investigation of the issue has been completed, and
     that action appropriate to its findings has been taken (or will be taken); and
   • this right to privacy precludes facility leadership from sharing further details of the resolution
     with the individual who raised the concern.
Handout: Draft Your Script

Good ethical decision making requires that a leader gather relevant information; involve stakeholders; identify relevant standards, norms and values; consider precedents and outcomes; and reflect on the impact the decision will have on the leader's and organization's reputation. In this initial intake step, you will set the groundwork for this process. Your focus in this exercise should be on ensuring that the staff member feels heard and understood, and leaves knowing that their concern has been taken seriously and follow-up steps will occur.

Review the following case scenarios. Choose one on which to base a script that provides a short but authentic response. Use the Tips for Responding to an Ethical Concern handout for guidance. Remember that in this exercise you are doing intake, gathering information and building a relationship rather than solving a problem.

Working on your own for five minutes, draft a brief, bulleted script of what you would say to staff if they brought this concern to you.

After you draft your script, pair with someone else and take turns practicing the response. If you are the listener, be prepared to offer feedback to the response and how it is delivered. Each of you should plan on taking a total of seven minutes delivering your response and receiving your partner's feedback. After 14 minutes, the entire group will reconvene to debrief.

Scenario 1

A staff member makes an appointment to meet with you and shares the following ethical concern:

“The manager of the mental health unit asked the primary care team to cut back on referrals because they (the mental health unit) are understaffed. Many of our patients have serious mental health issues that can’t be adequately addressed in primary care.”

How will you respond?

Scenario 2

A staff member comes forward with the following concern:

“A front-line supervisor consistently comes in late or leaves early from work. Even though the supervisor works through her lunch break, staff know that she isn't at her work station during her full tour of duty. I'm particularly concerned because I now see some junior staff starting to pick up the same behavior.”

How will you respond?
Scenario 3

A staff member comes forward with the following concern:

“I can’t sleep at night. Every day I work with patients I know are eligible to receive non-VA care, and who need it. I have been told not to make a referral unless it is to the Veterans Choice Program. Many of my patients aren’t eligible for that program. What do I do?”

How will you respond?
Take five minutes to draft your script here. Use the handout *Tips for Responding to an Ethical Concern* as a guide to prepare your script:

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