Ethical Leadership

Compass Point 1

Demonstrate that Ethics is a Priority

The first thing leaders must do to foster an ethical environment and culture is to make it clear to staff that ethics is something that matters to them. Unless leaders make a point to say and do things that demonstrate they care about ethics, staff will likely conclude that “ethics isn’t valued much around here.”

Seek to Say: Avoid Saying:

“I see ethics as a priority.”

“All that really matters is the bottom line.”

“If it’s the right thing to do, we’ll just have to figure out a way to do it.”

“What are the chances that anyone will find out?”

“Here’s a story that illustrates how important ethics can be.”

“You’re naïve – everyone does it.”

“We have an obligation to do the best we can for our patients.”

“Proceed until apprehended.”

“Everyone deserves to be treated with respect.”

“That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

“How can we balance these competing values?”

“I shouldn’t be telling you this, but…”

“If you have any ethical concerns about this, I encourage you to speak up.”

“You didn’t hear it from me…”

Encourage Discussion of Ethical Concerns

In a healthy organization, leadership creates an environment where open communication is welcome and encouraged. Employees can speak up without fear of having their comments held against them. Leaders can encourage discussion of ethical concerns in a number of ways. It’s important to reinforce on a regular basis that ethics is a legitimate and valued topic for discussion.

Examples:

Prove that Ethics Matters To You
Create opportunities to discuss ethics in meetings.
Discussion starters:

- “As leaders, how do we demonstrate respect and consideration for others?”
- “How does our organization project professionalism and responsibility at all times?”
- “As leaders, how can we model honesty, forthrightness, and trustworthiness?”
- As leaders, how do we build and maintain trust (and avoid losing it)?
- “As leaders, how can we prove that ethics matters to us?”
- “Let’s discuss some of our personal and organizational values…”
- “VA core values include: commitment, advocacy, respect, integrity, and excellence. Let’s define what (choose one value) means for our organization.”

Reinforce that ethics is a legitimate and valued topic of discussion.

Seek to say:

- “Now that we’ve determined what we can do legally, let’s discuss what we should do from an ethics perspective.”
- “I think there are some important ethical considerations behind this question.”
- “Let’s set aside some time to talk about the ethical aspects of this problem.”

http://vaww.ethics.va.gov/integratedethics/elic.asp
Examples:

Performance expectations.
If a leadership directive is expressed in absolute terms or too forcefully, it can create a strong incentive for staff to “game the system,” or to withhold or even misrepresent information, i.e., “fudge the numbers.”

Phrases to avoid in the context of communicating performance expectations:
- “I don’t care how you get it done”
- “By any means”
- “No matter what”
- “Just do it”
- “I expect 100 percent compliance”
- “It’s my way or the highway”
- “No excuses”
- “I don’t want to hear why you can’t”
- “It’s an open book test – there’s no excuse for wrong answers”

It’s important not to “shoot the messenger” or to blame employees for things that are beyond their control. While it’s appropriate for leaders to expect results, they also need to communicate clearly and explicitly that it’s not okay to lie, cheat, steal – or bend ethical standards to achieve them.

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Compass Point 2

Communicate Clear Expectations for Ethical Practice

Leaders should ensure that their expectations are reasonable and attainable. They need to be able to see the situation from staff’s perspective and anticipate barriers that staff might face in trying to uphold the standards set for them.

Setting out expectations that staff can’t meet or issuing dictatorial orders can backfire.

What Not to Do:

Example - Imagine a chief of staff talking to her service chiefs:

Chief of Staff: “Okay, the VISN office wants our budget for equipment by the end of the week. So each of you needs to get me the numbers for your big ticket items no later than day after tomorrow.”

(The chief of radiology hasn’t yet completed his annual review process to determine equipment needs and he can’t put together a reasonable estimate in 48 hours.)

Chief of Radiology: “Get her numbers,” he thinks to himself. “Great. She knows we aren’t ready to make a decision yet on equipment purchases. Is she telling me to fabricate data?”

Seek to Do:

The chief of staff could have avoided any potential misunderstanding by anticipating barriers to ethical practice and clarifying her expectations:

Chief of Staff: “I know this doesn’t give you much time, especially considering how this could affect what resources we’ll have to work with, but it’s essential I get figures from every department. The people in the VISN office need to submit the overall budget next Wednesday. I’ve warned them that some of our figures will only be a guess, not hard numbers, but they need something to work with now. Please indicate on your report which numbers are fairly hard and which are estimates for planning purposes. We just have to do the best we can for now.”

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Compass Point 3

Practice Ethical Decision Making

What does it mean to practice ethical decision making? All leadership decisions have an ethical component – that is, they are based on assumptions about what is good or bad, right or wrong. In practice, ethical decision making requires rigorously identifying and analyzing ethical values.

Decisions That Raise Ethical Concerns

Ethical concerns may be signaled by:

- Uncertainty about how to interpret or decide among important values
- An intuition that something isn’t right
- An issue that “keeps you up at night”
- A complaint or expression of dissatisfaction about how someone is being treated
- A substantive difference of opinion about the right course of action
- The prospect of a harmful or inequitable outcome
- An impulse to conceal information from others

Strategies for decision making:

- Use the Triage Tool for ethics-related leadership decisions to guide ethical decision making
- Include patients and/or Veteran representatives in major organizational decisions that affect Veterans
- Include clinical and non-clinical staff in major organizational decisions
- Include someone from your ethics program
- When decision-making involves a group process, designate someone specifically to raise ethical concerns
- Ensure all staff receive training about how to identify and respond to ethical concerns

Questions to systematically assess decisions:

- Do I have all of the facts relevant to the decision?
- Have I involved everyone who should be part of this decision?
- Does this decision reflect organizational, professional, and social values?
- Do the likely benefits of the decision outweigh any potential harms?
- Will this decision keep the problem from recurring and/or establish a good precedent?
- How would this decision look to someone outside the organization?

Examples:

Identify decisions that raise ethical concerns.

For leaders, any of these feelings or situations might indicate that there are underlying concerns at stake:

- A facility director needs to decide how to allocate resources among several competing priorities
- A clinical service chief feels uncomfortable about allowing a physician employed by a pharmaceutical company to practice without compensation in VHA clinics
- A finance director feels conflicted because he suspects his facility’s financial performance results are too good to be true
- A nurse manager is uncertain about how to respond to a patient’s demand that male nurses not participate in his care

Explain your decisions:

Leaders should explain to the individuals who have a stake in an ethical decision both the process used to make the decision and the reasons why certain options were chosen over others. Even people who disagree with a decision will be more likely to accept it if they perceive the decision-making process as fair and understand the rationale behind the decision. Willingness to stand by decisions by explaining the rationale also signals more courage and integrity.

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Examples:

Support participation by others.

Leaders at all levels should encourage others to participate in the IntegratedEthics program and make use of the resources it offers:

- Recognize and reward employees for their ethics-related activities and accomplishments
- Make time available for employees to participate in the ethics program and designate interested staff to participate
- Urge employees to participate in education sponsored by the ethics program
- Ensure that employees who participate in the ethics program have ethics-related responsibilities clearly delineated in their performance plans
- Share best practices with others in the facility and across the system
- Direct employees to the IntegratedEthics Council, the ethics consultation service, or the preventive ethics team when appropriate
- Periodically remind employees about IntegratedEthics and update them about its activities

Compass Point 4

Support Your Local Ethics Program

A leader who is committed to ethics is also likely to consider an investment in ethics programs, policies, and structures to be an important way to demonstrate that commitment. Leaders should demonstrate their commitment to ethics by supporting their local ethics programs and its activities.

Know what your ethics program is and what it does

Champion the Program

A key factor in the success or failure of ethics programs is employees’ perceptions of management’s motivations for establishing the program. When employees perceive that the programs were created to help guide behavior, as well as to establish a shared set of values and a positive culture, they are significantly more successful than programs that employees believe were designed primarily for purposes of compliance. Ethics programs cannot thrive if leaders do not champion them.

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