Leadership Strategies for Building an Ethical Environment and Culture

The Action Kit is a new series from the National Center for Ethics in Health Care (NCEHC). Action Kits describe systematic approaches and behaviors used to build a positive ethics environment and culture. This Action Kit is the first publication in this series. It provides an overview of the kinds of strategies leaders use to influence the ethical environment and culture at their facility. Future Action Kits will describe these approaches in detail.

Introduction
In the day-to-day scramble to run a hospital system, attention to ethics can be lost among many competing priorities. However, the cost of not investing in an ethical environment and culture can be high, as the wait time controversy made apparent. There are many leaders in VA who have succeeded in creating a strong ethical culture, scoring above the VA average on the IntegratedEthics® (IE) Staff Survey and performing comparable to external benchmarks. To learn what behaviors, activities, and processes these successful leaders use to create a positive perception of ethics at their facility, NCEHC conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with leaders and staff at 12 of these facilities. Their responses and insights are summarized in this Action Kit. The full report is available at (http://vaww.ethics.va.gov/docs/integratedethics/el_interview_report_final_071715.pdf).

There is no silver bullet. There is no one thing. It is a combination of things, it is a leadership process and it is continuous.

Director Timothy Liezert, FACHE
Orlando VAMC

The interviews revealed that leaders deployed a dozen or more different strategies at their facilities. They thought about these strategies on three levels: (1) what they did personally to promote the environment they wanted; (2) what their IE program was responsible for accomplishing; and (3) what systematic processes they used across the institution to promote a positive ethics environment and culture. Some strategies are derived directly from the ethical leadership compass points in IE. Other strategies went beyond those described in the model. These strategies include building trust by being accessible, being fair, leading through values, and coaching and mentoring ethics competencies in supervisory leaders. In sum, successful leaders were highly engaged with ethics, had an explicit strategy to create a positive ethics environment and culture, and invested personally in executing that strategy.

Concepts Explored Through Structured Interviews
- Communicating expectations for ethical behavior through tools, actions or processes
- Building community ownership of an ethical environment and culture
- Eliciting ethical concerns from staff and responding effectively to them
- Creating transparency in the handling of ethical concerns
- Building trust between leadership and staff
- Ensuring staff is treated fairly
- Managing fair allocation of resources
- Developing ethical competencies in others
1. Have a Vision that Speaks to Values
A number of the facility directors said they shared a vision statement or values-based motto with staff. These value statements form the bedrock of what leaders communicate to subordinate supervisors and staff. The directors quote these values when making decisions and direct others to use them when prioritizing actions. They use value statements to set the tone for new employees and leaders and deploy them at the opening and closing of meetings to frame discussions and decision making.

2. Makes Ethics Visible...Even if You Don't Call it Ethics
All of the facility directors interviewed understood it was their job to set the ethical tone at their facility. Indeed, many said it was their first job as a leader. Directors used informal communications such as personal emails or discussions during meetings to convey ethics. They also used structured communication processes to emphasize ethics. All of the following examples were discussed:
- Town Hall meetings with regular time reserved to discuss ethics and values
- Regular ethics features in newsletters or an ethics newsletter with articles by leaders
- Daily messages, screen savers, and email blasts from leaders to demonstrate ethics is important
- Strategic planning that incorporates ethics to demonstrate its importance

3. See and Be Seen
Each of the directors devoted a substantial amount of time to being visible and making themselves available throughout their facilities, including efforts to connect with staff at CBOCs and other remote sites. Every single facility director we interviewed said the leadership team has to be visible within the facility. Staff can’t trust and won’t bring issues forward to people they don’t know. Staff gets to know the leadership team by seeing them and speaking with them on a regular basis. Directors also emphasized that rounding in service units and directly observing work at the facility served all of their culture priorities: building trust and open communication, reinforcing civility and respect, observing customer service, surfacing patient safety concerns, and identifying areas for quality improvement. The approaches described included the following:
- Rounding to build rapport with staff
- Observing the work firsthand
- Spending time in units watching and talking with staff and Veterans

4. Listen, Listen, Listen
In a healthy organization, leaders create an environment where open communication is welcomed and encouraged. Leaders reinforce on a regular basis that ethics is a legitimate and valued topic for discussion and they create formal opportunities for staff to discuss ethics. While all of the facility directors mentioned rounding and walking the halls as a means to build rapport with staff, many also employed specific strategies for eliciting staff concerns. All directors noted that they invited feedback from staff, asking employees to email or speak to them directly. Many deployed formal feedback mechanisms like suggestion boxes and incident reporting systems. A
few took extraordinary steps to meet regularly in small groups or one-on-one to talk with line staff about their concerns. All of the following examples were discussed:

- Invite input: Hold the director’s leadership meeting in an open forum and invite staff to attend and ask questions; elicit questions prior to town hall meetings and answer those questions in that public forum; hold structured discussion groups; open up meetings for discussion; use quick cards; engage large numbers of staff to represent their units on IE committees; advertise the ethics consult service and invite questions
- Hold regular lunches or breakfasts for staff to talk with the director
- Hold regular office hours for staff to talk with the director
- Schedule periodic focus groups, led by the director, to surface staff concerns
- Deploy feedback cards to elicit staff opinions
- Establish suggestion boxes including email, web-based and physical boxes

5. Follow Up on Ethical Concerns
All of the facility directors understood the link between follow-up to ethical concerns and staff engagement and satisfaction. Some used informal tracking processes to ensure follow-up while others used formal, public tracking mechanisms.

- Use tracking mechanisms to follow up on ethical concerns: electronic patient incident reporting systems; SharePoint action log; MESS boards (methods, equipment, staff, and supplies) that roll up from unit, to service, to the whole facility
- Assign follow-up to an individual, a function, office or committee
- Close the loop on every personnel issue and disciplinary action with those who raised the issue

6. Transparency
Transparency in decision making and operational processes was uniformly second nature at successful facilities. Most facilities used committees to make decisions and the work of those committees was open to scrutiny by employees.

- Hold open decision-making meetings and allow auditing
- Post minutes, publish and talk about the results of meetings
- Give feedback to requesters to help them understand why their proposal was not supported and help them improve
- Rotate membership on decision-making committees to ensure all services can participate over time
- Include union partners in decision-making committees
- Discuss hiring decisions openly

Transparency is key. Resource allocation (space, time, people, equipment) decisions have to make sense. Fairness must be addressed head on ... Give an explanation for why a particular decision is made. Explain your thinking. All of the minutes from the meetings are available to staff...

Director Keith Sullivan, FACHE
Chalmers P. Wylie
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7. Recognize and Reward Ethical Behavior
Many successful directors either formally or informally recognize ethical behavior. Most acknowledged an explicit strategy to create positive stories that could be repeated among staff at their facility. Directors also wanted to send a message that ethical behavior matters to them, they notice it, and they appreciate it when staff lives up to ethical ideals.

- Use appreciation awards to reinforce the behavior you want
- Give public shout outs to reward behavior
- Say thank you publicly and personally

8. You Don’t Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression
When asked how to communicate expectations for ethical behavior to staff, nearly every facility director replied that he or she used new employee orientation as a means to establish expectations and standards. Most made a point of being the first person to speak to new employees during orientation and used that as an opportunity to talk about vision, mission, values and expectations for service oriented, Veteran centered, respectful and civil behavior.

- The director leads new employee orientation and begins the first session
- Introduce IE, its function and importance during orientation
- Incorporate ethics and values into on-boarding through formal training, mentoring, coaching, and follow up meetings over the first year of new employment
- Interject ethics during the hiring process; ask ethics related questions in interviews; be fair and transparent during pay panels; give feedback to internal applicants to help them improve for the next application

9. Build an Army
Nearly all of the successful facility directors pointed to their role as coach and mentor; instilling ethical leadership principles in the quadrad, managers, and supervisors; as one of their most important roles. Many devoted an extraordinary amount of time talking to these subordinate leaders about expectations of ethical behavior and the supervisor’s role in helping to create an ethical environment and culture. A striking number of directors noted how important it was to have a strong working relationship with the union(s), which was a tremendous help in communicating and enforcing ethical standards and expectations.

- Meet regularly with frontline leaders and include ethics and values on the agenda
- Hold a book club with supervisors to prompt a discussion on important ethics topics
- Require supervisors to complete the ethical leadership self assessment (ELSA) and create a personal action plan
- Ensure supervisors discuss ethics with staff; require inclusion of the discussion in meeting minutes; and review the minutes to see that the discussion was included
- Use case studies to help subordinate leaders practice raising ethics with staff
- Use the IE council as champions throughout the facility
10. Sweat the Small Stuff
Many facility directors focused on minor acts of unethical or inappropriate behavior to establish the expectation that following the rules is important and is enforced. Leaders also told their staff that they should hold one another accountable for behaving ethically. Finally, directors emphasized their responsibility to ensure personnel and disciplinary actions were fair, equitable, and transparent to the employee receiving the action.

- Call employees on the small transgressions
- Rehabilitate, redirect; go easy on punishment
- Keep disciplinary actions and rewards consistent

11. But Don’t Sweat the Numbers
While leaders tracked and discussed quantitative metrics, they didn’t focus on them with employees. Staff was told to do the right thing for the right reason and to use the right process. However, making a performance number was not what mattered in their work.

- Talk about performance in terms of goals (e.g., “provide every Veteran with an appointment time that meets their needs”) but don’t focus on numeric values
- Effectively manage systems and processes and good outcomes follow

12. Use an Ethical Decision-making Process
As if lifted directly from the ethical leadership compass points, leaders described the importance of including stakeholders, fully understanding the facts of an issue, gauging the equity of a decision, and explaining the rationale for it. Indeed, a number of sites used the NCEHC ethical decision-making tool as a formal component of their decision process. Others created their own tools consistent with these priorities.

13. Support Your Ethics Program
At every facility, the director or member of the quadrad chaired the IE Council, allowing leadership to follow IE activities, influence priorities, and problem solve. IE staff also gained easy access to leadership and kept them engaged in IE activities. Some facilities included IE staff on the executive leadership council or similar forums such as morning meeting or senior staff calls. This allows IE staff to communicate ethics priorities broadly within the facility and raise concerns about issues under discussion by leadership. All of the facilities used IE as a means to understand and address ethical pain points within the facility.