



Wringing the most out of ethics

- **Codes of ethics and conduct communicate minimum standards of acceptable behavior to employees.**
- **Employees with a sense of ownership in the organization are likely to keep and exceed its minimum ethical standards.**

An understanding of the minimum standards of acceptable behavior is critical to the success of any group of people working together. Organizations communicate their minimum standards through ethical codes or codes of conduct which can be summarized by the principle: do no harm to the organization, its customers, or fellow employees. These minimum standards should be stressed in new employee orientation, but also be repeated periodically to all employees.

It is often helpful to supplement any discussion of the minimum standards with examples of ethical failures. Beyond satisfying our curiosity for the salacious details, these examples are helpful in showing how and why ethical violations occurred and the resulting negative consequences.

Often a harder task for organizations is keeping the ethical behavior message fresh beyond the seminar room. Periodically repeating the minimum standards, while important, is rarely sufficient to avoid ethical violations.

One way organizations can keep the ethics message fresh is by creating an environment where employees feel a sense of ownership in the organization. Employees who feel a connection with the organization beyond a paycheck are more likely to act ethically than those lacking that connection.

To illustrate this idea, consider the scene after an outdoor music concert. Typically the concert area is strewn with trash, even if numerous trash cans are available. The same concert goers, who freely abandoned their refuse everywhere but in a trash can, will for the most part regularly clean their yards and not allow trash to accumulate at home, where there is a strong sense of ownership. Likewise, employees with a sense of ownership in their organization are likely to go far beyond the

minimum standards of ethical behavior, improving both themselves and the organization. A word of caution: ownership is not to be confused with entitlement, which places the interests of the employee ahead of the organization, its customers, and co-workers.

Creating an environment of ownership within the organization is part art, part science, and the subject of many management books. Common techniques include allowing all employees to meaningfully contribute ideas for achieving organizational goals, carrying out effective process improvement initiatives such as *kaizen* events and risk assessments, publicly acknowledging employees for excellence, paying a fair wage, and hiring and promoting on the basis of merit.

In conclusion, it is important for all employees to be aware of the minimum standards of acceptable behavior expected of them. However, employees with a sense of ownership in their organization are far more likely to keep and exceed those ethical standards.

Suggested Action Steps: Read and reflect on Minnesota's ethical standards for state employees in MS 43A.38, MS 16C.04, and MS 609.456 Subd. 2. Can you identify things that can be done to increase employees' sense of ownership and help maintain your agency's ethical standards?

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