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Turning a blind eye

- **There is a temptation to turn a blind eye to information that potentially puts our activities or employees in an unflattering light.**
- **It is important that management deals promptly and consistently with allegations.**

We have often heard individuals accused of “turning a blind eye” to undesirable situations within their organizations. The concept of turning a blind eye is attributable to an English naval captain who was blinded in one eye early in his career. It is said that he used his blind eye to his advantage whenever he did not want to follow the orders signaled from a superior officer’s ship. He would simply lift his telescope to his blind eye when he checked the signal flags and then claim that he did not see their signaled commands.

Unfortunately, the tendency to turn a blind eye is not limited to old sea captains. In our organizations today, there is still a temptation to disregard or ignore information that potentially puts our activities or employees in an unflattering light. This behavior is especially dangerous when we ignore something that we know is wrong or unethical.

Why is there an organizational bias to turn a blind eye? The following are some likely reasons:

- There is a chance (we can only hope!) that the information or allegations are unfounded.
- There is a potential for the agency’s reputation to be harmed if the information becomes public.
- The burden of proof is on the employer, including assembling adequate documentation to prove wrongdoing.
- If there is suspected employee misconduct, the agency must consider bargaining agreement implications, including employee leaves or suspensions, arbitration proceedings and settlement agreements.
- The situation may be messy, difficult, and time consuming to investigate and resolve.

- Outside parties, such as law enforcement and the Legislative Auditor’s Office, may have to get involved.

Despite all of these potential negative effects, it is important that agency management deals promptly and consistently with allegations of potential wrongdoing or ethical lapses. Generally waiting it out, or hoping someone else will handle the situation, is not a viable option. Just like a raging fire under a pot, the situation will rarely cool itself and go away. Rather, it is only a matter of time before the pot boils over, creating larger and more widespread consequences.

Within your organization, it is important to set an appropriate tone, so that employees and stakeholders are comfortable bringing forward issues and any allegations are taken seriously. It is also important that these allegations are dealt with consistently and timely. Although the short-term negative effects of a fraud, theft, or ethical lapse are not pleasant, it is management’s responsibility to deal with these situations in a transparent and fair manner. Your outside stakeholders will appreciate your openness and your employees will understand and value your fairness and truthfulness.

Suggested action steps: Consider your organization. Have you or others turned a blind eye to potential wrongdoing? What can you do to promote open communication and prompt action regarding allegations?

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