



Volume 6, Issue 5 – May 29, 2014

Looking at ethics through a broken window

Highlights

- Allowing breaches or unethical behaviors to occur unchecked may open the window for larger infractions.
- Even small ethics infractions should not be ignored.
- All unethical behavior must be addressed promptly and consistently.

During the eight years that Rudolph Giuliani was mayor of New York City, violent crime declined by over 56 percent. Many attribute this to Giuliani's policy of aggressively policing low-level crimes, a policy referred to as the *Broken Windows Theory*. George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson introduced the *Broken Windows Theory* in 1982 in an *Atlantic Monthly* article. The theory proposes that, if you enforce laws on minor offenses, major crime rates will drop. The idea behind the theory's namesake is when a window is broken and immediately fixed, it shows that disorder will not be tolerated, while a broken window left unrepaired suggests disorder and opens the window for more serious crimes to flourish.

The *Broken Windows Theory* also applies to promoting an ethical culture. Allowing small breaches or unethical behavior to occur unchecked creates a culture where larger infractions may become easier to justify. Employees must understand that no infraction is too small, and that no matter the size, there is no tolerance for unethical behavior.

Apply the *Broken Windows Theory* to your agency ethics in the following ways:

Set the proper tone - The proper tone should be set at the top, middle, and bottom of the agency. The tone at all levels of the agency must be aligned for an effective and strong ethical culture. Management at all levels must communicate expectations for ethical behavior to employees, and all employees should be expected to act in accordance with agency's ethical standards.

Guidance - An agency's Code of Conduct policy gives employees guidance on business matters and expected behavior. An effective Code of Conduct policy establishes the ethical

expectations for both employees and management, and outlines enforcement methods and consequences of noncompliance.

Communication and training - Having a Code of Conduct policy is not enough. Employees must be aware that the policy exists and receive periodic training on the agency policy. Employees must have information about ways they can seek advice on ethics issues, report allegations, or raise concerns.

Accountability - Management must provide a clear vision of how each employee's role fits into the agency's mission and goals and hold employees accountable for the activities in their areas. Employees should bring concerns of unethical behavior and activities to the attention of the appropriate individuals or through designated communication channels.

Zero tolerance - No infraction or level of unethical behavior should be ignored or is too small to have consequences. Problems must be addressed and handled consistently. Allowing small infractions or unethical behaviors to occur only opens the window for bigger problems in the future.

By fostering a culture of self-regulation and accountability, agencies can help ensure employees, protect agency operations, and that all windows remain unbroken.

Suggested action steps: Is your agency Code of Conduct policy up-to-date? Is it available to all employees? Do all employees receive periodic training? Do you know how to or feel comfortable raising ethics concerns to the attention of management within your agency?

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