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Office Ethics

AT THE CORE

This topic examines:

- **BUSINESSPEOPLE SPEAKING OUT**
- **DEFINITIONS OF OFFICE ETHICS**
- **AREAS OF ETHICAL CONCERN**
- **BEARING THE BLAME**
- **DECISION-MAKING MODEL FOR ETHICAL BEHAVIOR**
- **APPLYING THE MODEL**
- **DISAPPEARING OFFICE SUPPLIES**
- **TALKING IT OUT WITH OTHERS**
- **DOING THE RIGHT THING**

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very day you are faced with decisions that can result in your being perceived as an ethical or unethical individual. A consistent path of ethical decision making, however, will make you a more valuable employee who will be sought after for responsible work ethics. But just reading a book or taking a course on the subject of ethics will not necessarily change a

dishonest person into an honest one. Certain decisions you make in life will not necessarily cast you in the role of a dishonest person—but rather, a person with questionable behavior. Studying the subject of office ethics, however, may result in your pausing before making a potentially unethical decision (a pause just long enough to consider the consequences to yourself and others), steering you down an ethical path of decision-making.

This first topic will look at the ways businesspeople define office ethics, look at the specific issue of disappearing office supplies, and then discuss a real-life ethical dilemma.

Businesspeople Speaking Out

When business executives are asked for their input about office ethics, key responses include the following:

- Personal use of the computer on company time
- Personal use of the telephone on company time
- Disappearing office supplies
- Office romance
- Inappropriate office behavior
- Office gossip

When further pursued, however, the topic of office ethics includes serious issues that could end up as legal battles in the courtroom.

- Falsification of resumes
- Plagiarism
- Sabotage
- Sexual harassment
- Receiving bribes
- Violence in the workplace

No matter how the subject of office ethics is defined or identified, business managers consistently comment on how costly it is to them. Innocent gossip that is inaccurate can mean hours of frustration while trying to reestablish goodwill and provide the truth to all individuals concerned.

Business executives and office professionals often do not define ethical behavior in the same way. OfficeClickSM¹ provided a survey using a statistical cross section of U.S. businesses and surveyed 150 of their managers. They posed the same questions to a like number of administration professionals, which provided interesting, yet contrasting data.

When the managers were asked to identify the ethical challenges administrative assistants had to address, they listed the following in priority order:

- Notarizing a document without witnessing the signature
- Telling a “little white lie” to protect a supervisor

- Running personal errands for a supervisor
- Experiencing verbal, sexual, or emotional harassment

Most (90%) of the managers stated that their administrative assistants did not encounter the latter challenges (sexual or emotional harassment) while under their employ. Interestingly, the administrative assistants under the employ of the same managers did not respond in the same way. Further, the large number of them responding in a different manner suggests that communication between the two groups may be poor. Here is how the administrative assistants prioritized the same issues:



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- Ran personal errands for a supervisor: 58%
- Told a “little white lie” to protect a supervisor: 47%
- Experienced verbal, sexual, or emotional harassment: 18%
- Notarized a document without witnessing the signature: 10%

Definitions of Office Ethics

The average American has a solid common-sense understanding of what an ethical act or decision is: It is something judged as proper or acceptable based on some standard of right and wrong. At the very least, an activity should be legal.

Some people believe an ethical act is one that leads to the greatest benefit for the most people. Certainly it does not infringe on one’s human rights of life, freedom of speech, and due process. An ethical act helps people feel better about themselves in the long run but may be challenging or stressful in the short term.

Areas of Ethical Concern

Concern for office ethics can be grouped into four areas:

1. **Conflict of interest.** A conflict of interest exists when an individual must choose whether to advance his or her personal interests, those of the organization, or those of some other group. Which one takes priority?

2. **Honesty and fairness.** Honesty refers to truthfulness, integrity, and trustworthiness; fairness is the quality of being just, equitable, and impartial.
3. **Communication.** Communication refers to the transmission of information and the sharing of meaning. Communications that are false or misleading can destroy customers' trust in an organization. Lying is a major ethical issue.
4. **Organizational relationships.** These involve the behavior of an organization's employees toward customers, suppliers, subordinates, superiors, peers, and others. One ethical issue related to relationships is plagiarism: taking someone else's work and presenting it as your own without providing adequate credit or compensation to the source.

Bearing the Blame

You may find it difficult to believe that *you* are responsible for something that happened. Perhaps your own behavior, whether explicit or implied, causes something to happen in a negative way. Imagine how your lack of a smile at a specific moment; your quick, flippant response to a question; or your comment to the wrong person may cause a rumor to circulate that is extremely damaging to the company.

Perhaps you have access to privileged information; or perhaps you do not have access to privileged information, but others assume you do. Either way, even subtle behavior on your part might have a bearing on someone else's actions. You may never know how much power you have by your implied actions. In such cases, there is not a lot you can do since you are not aware you are the source.

If you suspect, however, that something you did or said was interpreted incorrectly by others, you may want to approach those who were involved and share your concern. You may want to suggest that your actions were misinterpreted. This opens the door for those who want to take measures to correct the damage.

Further, if you knowingly made an error and did something unethical, you need to bear the blame for your behavior, even if the action was something as basic as breaking a coworkers confidence. Image this scenario: One of your coworkers comes to you and says, "I know you told me that the closing of one of our departments is a

confidential matter. I feel bad because I let the cat out of the bag—but I didn't mean it. When Anna asked me about the future of our division, I just blurted it out. I don't know how it happened. I cherish my friendship with you, and I feel very guilty. Will you forgive me?"

Yes, you probably would be quite disappointed with your friend, but at least you would be prepared for the rumors that would begin circulating. Further, you would know not to share confidences with this person in the future. Your coworker also may have been trying to tell you subtly that he was not able to handle the responsibility of confidential matters.

Decision-Making Model for Ethical Behavior

When faced with an ethical dilemma, certain steps can help guide you through the decision-making process. First, you need to review the background of the situation as carefully as possible. Take into consideration the history of the individuals involved. Obtain as many details as you possibly can. Try to get a clear picture of exactly what the conflict is. What is the ethical concern?

Once you have identified the background, the conflict, and the problem, you can begin figuring out the solution. You might even write down your thought processes as you go along. Identify all the possible decisions you might make, and try to identify the outcomes as a result of each of those decisions. What will be the effect on each person involved? Make a list of the impact each decision will have on everyone affected.

After you make a careful analysis including as many details as possible, sit back and weigh each possible decision. What are the consequences in the short term and the long term? Where is the least amount of damage? What is the best ethical decision to make? Finally, make your decision and be able to defend it. Here is a summary of the thought process model.

1. **Background:** Review the history, background, and details of the situation.
2. **Conflict:** Describe the conflict and the ethical dilemma you observe.
3. **Outcome:** Identify the possible decisions and probable outcomes generated by each decision.

4. **Impact:** List the impact of each outcome on people's lives.
5. **Weigh:** Weigh and compare all decisions and their possible outcomes.
6. **Decide:** Decide and defend your decision.

Applying the Model

Let's apply this model to the following scenario.

Scenario: The scene is a large office building with a manufacturing plant in the back. In addition to your regular job as administrative assistant to the company president, you substitute for Norma at the main reception desk while she takes her breaks or when she is out ill. You have worked for the company for many years and know most of the 400 employees by name; therefore, you enjoy working the reception desk. Norma, however, is not happy with her job. She does not work well under pressure and is sometimes irritable with customers. You are embarrassed by Norma's behavior because you take a great deal of pride in your job and the company. Norma has been snippy with you on occasion, but you think she may be jealous of your position in the executive offices. She is not one of your favorite people, but since you cover for her in her absence, you actually have very little contact with her.

In the lobby are two coffee tables surrounded by several chairs. One particularly busy day you are subbing for Norma, who is out sick. You have processed at least 200 people through the reception area to visit employees in the plant. About 4 p.m., an hour before closing, a visitor approaches you at the reception desk and hands you a large amount of money saying, "This was left on the coffee table. It's not mine, but perhaps you can figure out who left it there."

1. **Background:** The reception desk is generally the lost and found for items left in the large reception lobby. Anything not recovered by visitors is generally set out in the lunchroom for employees to take. However, the person working the reception desk has first choice on anything recovered.



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2. **Identify the conflict:** The money left behind is \$107, a sizable amount. If you leave the money for the next day, Norma will probably keep it for herself. If you take the money now, a person coming back tomorrow to look for it will be talking to Norma, who might not give the correct information. If she finds out you took it, she could be angry.
3. **Possible outcomes:** (a) You can leave the money at the reception desk with a note to Norma that it was turned in today. (b) You can take the money, leave a note for Norma that some money was left, but not tell her the amount. (c) You can take the money and not say anything to Norma, waiting to see if she asks you whether somebody came to claim it.
4. **Impact on others:** (a) If the money is left with Norma at the desk, she may keep it for herself if no one claims it. She can easily lie to you or a client that someone came in and claimed it. She then has the money, and you do not. (b) If you take the money and leave a note to Norma, you are behaving contrary to how you usually handle lost and found items, and it may imply that you do not trust Norma. Your tenuous relationship may be damaged even more. You have the money, however, if no one claims it. Further, if a company client asks for the money, he or she will think highly of the company and its employees if the money is there waiting for him or her. (c) If you do not say anything to Norma, you do not have to interact with her regarding the situation unless, of course, someone comes to recover the money. The client might think it strange that you took the money without saying anything to anyone. You are taking a chance. You also have to live with the guilt if no one claims the money and Norma never finds out. If someone does claim the money and you surrender it, Norma may be quite unhappy with you.
5. **Weigh the decision:** Option b may have the least impact if you manage to convey the information to Norma in a professional way that does not imply your mistrust of her.
6. **Decide:** You go with option b and say in your note to Norma that because of the value of the item, you feel better locking it up overnight. You also say in the note that if no one claims the money, you are willing to split it with her or donate it to a worthy cause, which you hope will help mend your relationship with Norma.

Disappearing Office Supplies

Just where do you draw the line? If you take a paper clip from the office, is that unethical? If you take a box of paper clips from the office for use at home, is that unethical? If you take a stapler home, is that unethical? Perhaps considering the intention of the initial purchase will help you make a decision.

Consider the reason the box of paper clips was originally purchased. The box was purchased for office workers to assemble papers for better organization, especially in transporting them from one office to another. The individual paper clip, however, is meant to collect items for easy transport, even if it is to your own home. The stapler was purchased for use in the office and should not find its way to your home unless it is declared as surplus or out of date.

You may not consider these little things as being very expensive or very important to a large corporate entity. What difference is a box of paper clips to IBM, which is worth over a billion dollars? If all employees took that attitude, however, one box of paper clips multiplied by every IBM employee would add up to a lot of money and a big loss to the company.

Talking it Out With Others

Most people have a general sense of what is right or wrong, especially in the office environment. If you sense that things are not quite right ethically at your office, you may want to take a leadership position and suggest having a meeting to discuss ethical values. Some companies publish their own ethical values for employees and clients to read.

You may want to offer your leadership to the company by forming a discussion group on minor topics. You can provide some suggestions to get the discussion going. Later you might ask people to write down suggested topics for discussion, anonymously at first. Each meeting could deal with a different theme or topic, such as break room practices, parking lot ethics, refrigerator manners, or other minimally emotional topics. Subsequent meetings might broach more potentially



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volatile subjects, such as bringing children to work, covering up for others, providing favors, accepting gifts, and so on.

At these meetings, ask a lot of “What if...” questions to explore the variations of a topic. For instance, if you are discussing refrigerator manners and the conversation includes spoiled food, stolen lunches, cleanup, and so on, you might ask, “What if we have a holiday picnic?” “What if we have guests?” “What if food is forgotten?” Discussions should include and be confirmed by as many people as possible; the results should be shared with everyone.

By discussing ethical concerns with coworkers, including people at all levels, you will be clear about expectations for doing the right thing.

Doing the Right Thing

When you are clear about what is right and what is wrong, you owe it to your company (or the one who is paying your salary) to do what is expected of you. This is what business ethics is all about.

If you are ever in doubt as to what to do, ask. Begin communications with others by asking meaningful questions. Present scenarios or situations that are relevant to you and them. Ask others what they would do in a particular situation. Keep asking questions until you understand what the expectations are.

If you are ever tempted to do the wrong thing, pause and think. Think about the long-term ramifications to yourself and to the company for which you work.

Concluding Thoughts

Establishing good, clear communication within the office environment is essential. Some companies work with employees to come to a consensus about corporate ethical values and then publish them as a means of developing dialogue about ethics. Having such guidelines helps individuals to pause before making a decision that involves ethics—a pause to consider all the ramifications of a particular decision: to self; to coworkers; to management; and, in some cases, to stockholders.

RECAP OF KEY CONCEPTS

- ◆ Businesspeople speak out about their concern for office ethics and how it has a serious impact on the overall strength of their company.
- ◆ Ethical concerns include personal use of the computer and telephone, disappearing office supplies, office romance, inappropriate office behavior, and office gossip.
- ◆ The definition of office ethics covers a wide range of issues and concerns.
- ◆ Office ethics includes conflict of interest, honesty and fairness, communication, and organizational relationships.
- ◆ Communicating is critical—including bearing the blame—in becoming clear as to what is expected of you with regard to office ethics.
- ◆ Some corporations go to great lengths to develop ethical guidelines for their employees.
- ◆ Disappearing office supplies is just one example of a fundamental ethical concern in the workplace.
- ◆ When faced with an ethical dilemma, apply a decision-making model to the situation by reviewing the background, the conflict, and the problem.