

ETHICS & CODE OF CONDUCT

OBJECTIVES

- Staff will understand the definition of ethics
- Staff will understand the continuum of compromise
- Staff will review department policy relating to ethics and code of conduct

Ethics is a philosophy that deals with rightness and wrongness.

- *Ethics – “The study of standards of right and wrong; that part of philosophy addressing moral conduct, duty, and judgment.”*
- *Moral principles of duty and virtue that prescribe how we should behave such as honesty, integrity, respect, and compassion for individuals, responsibility, fairness, and respect for law and authority.*
- *Ability to discern right from wrong, good from evil, and propriety from impropriety.*
- *Commitment to do what is right regardless of the temptation and pressure to do otherwise.*

Personal integrity, a conscious decision to do the right thing even in the face of overwhelming pressure, and recognition of personal responsibility for one’s actions are all indispensable ingredients in achieving high levels of professional ethical conduct. We demonstrate integrity by acting ethically; we must exhibit professional ethics at all times on the job.

The decisions we make define who we are. They are defining moments. How do we resolve these defining moments? A defining moment is an opportunity to aspire to the highest of human potential. Defining moments present us with the opportunity to choose an ethical or unethical course of action. Regardless of the problem or dilemma, at that defining moment, we have the ability to make the right choice: the ability to choose what is right for the public, a co-worker, the county, ourselves, and our family.

CONTINUUM OF COMPROMISE

The continuum of compromise consists of three phases: acts of omission, acts of commission- administrative, and acts of commission- criminal. Understanding the continuum of compromise will allow employees to recognize the risks, assess their own potential for compromise, and develop an effective strategy to ensure ethical integrity. The “continuum of compromise” outlines the path of ethical compromise and can be used to help employees understand and mentally prepare for the ethical dilemmas they

will face. People do not wake up one morning and take a quantum leap from being honest hard working employees to being criminal defendants. Employees do not wake up and say, "I'm going to become a criminal today"; rather, they become victims of a subtle continuum. Understanding the issues and being mentally prepared will help you assume responsibility for and make decisions that are more appropriate. Compromising behavior has to be seen as something that can potentially affect employees. Employees who view compromise or corruption as an "all or none" phenomenon will not see themselves as "at risk." When the potential for compromise is not recognized, employees will see compromise as an unlikely event.

When employees are ill-prepared to face the ethical dilemmas to which they will be exposed and are unaware of the continuum of compromise, they can blindly and over a period of time allow mild infractions develop into serious criminal violations and lead to devastating consequences.

Acts of Omission

Acts of omission occur when employees rationalize and justify not doing things they are responsible for doing. At this point, employees can feel justified in not doing things that, from their own perspective, appear to "even the score." If they (whoever they may be) do not care about us, why should we care about them? Acts of omission can include "not seeing" or avoiding on-sight activity, omitting paperwork, lack of follow up, and many other activities which employees can easily omit.

Acts of Commission- Administrative

Once employees routinely fail to fulfill or omit job responsibilities, the journey to this next step is not difficult. Instead of just omitting duties and responsibilities, employees commit administrative violations. Breaking small rules, that seem inconsequential or which stand in the way of getting the job done, is the first step. This can set the stage for continued progression down the continuum. Department sanctions are typically the only risk that employees face at this point.

Acts of Commission- Criminal

Unsuspecting employees can unwillingly travel to this next and final stage on the continuum of compromise. In this stage employees engage in and rationalize behavior that just a few months before would not be imagined. At first, acts of criminal commission may appear benign and not terribly different from acts of administrative commission.

Now, the risks are far beyond just administrative reprimands or suspension... employee's face being fired or prosecuted when they are caught. The initially honest, dedicated, above reproach employee now asks, "Where did it all go wrong." "How did this happen." as they face the realities of personal and professional devastation and criminal prosecution.

POLICY

Discuss all department policies relating to ethics and standards of conduct.

CLOSING

- *Encourage discussion about this presentation, department policy, and examples of ethical issues employees frequently encounter.*
- *Encourage discussion about the need to maintain high ethical standards.*