

What is the Answer to Ethical Conduct Problems?

Ethical misconduct can cause a host of challenges for an agency, not the least of which is eroding an agency's ability to accomplish its mission. Public sector employees who behave unethically not only adversely affect those inside their agency (and bring shame upon the agency's reputation) but also harm others outside the agency—the American public who utilizes the agency's products and services. In one way or another, Federal work touches the lives of every American every day. For these reasons, it is not a surprise that Governmentwide job analysis studies conducted by the Office of Personnel Management have found that the *Integrity/Honesty* competency is perceived as crucial to performance across a wide range of occupations.

Are ethics problems common? According to the results of the Ethics Resource Center's (www.ethics.org/) recently-released *The State of Ethics in Large Companies*,¹ fifty-one percent of employees in these organizations² reported witnessing unethical behavior on the job. Clearly, some action is needed to reduce the incidence of unethical behavior in the workplace.

What can be done to mitigate ethics problems?

Strategy 1: Encourage safe reporting of violations. Agencies might, as the ERC has suggested, put increased emphasis on oversight and programs which allow employees to anonymously report ethics violations without fear of retaliation.

Strategy 2: Role-model ethical behavior. Agency leaders should be proactive in encouraging employees to behave more ethically to begin with—and not just because they fear being caught. Leaders' words and actions greatly influence agency culture and can shape employees' perceptions of what is—and what is not—appropriate behavior.

Strategy 3: Determine the root cause of ethics problems. HR professionals might advise their agency's leadership to determine the root cause of ethical misconduct in the agency. For example, if otherwise-honest employees have problems in specific areas it may be due to ignorance or misunderstanding of the ethical standards that apply to their particular jobs. Government jobs include many situations in which ethical considerations are different or even seem counter to the ethics we apply in our non-work lives. For example, it may seem unhelpful or dishonest when our job requires us to withhold information due to privacy or confidentiality restrictions. It may also seem dishonest when confidentiality must be violated for workplace safety reasons. In these circumstances, the best answer is likely training on the ethical responsibilities of an employee's particular job.

Strategy 4: Use sound selection assessments to screen out candidates who are likely to pose an ethics risk. Unfortunately, it can be challenging to predict who will engage in unethical behavior. However, there are certain characteristics that can help agencies discern whether an individual is likely to pose an ethics risk. For example, psychologists have identified a general characteristic they call "Conscientiousness." People with a high level of this characteristic tend to behave in honest and responsible ways across a wide variety of situations. People who score low on conscientiousness measures are considered risks to employ in any job. It can be difficult (if not futile) to try to train people to be more conscientious or honest; these characteristics tend to be innate qualities of individuals, shaped over a lifetime. Thus, the

best way to foster a conscientious workforce is with a good hiring process—including reference checking to verify applicant claims about their work history and mechanisms such as the probationary period to remove unethical employees as soon as they reveal themselves.

Ethics problems occur much more frequently than we typically assume and it is critical that agencies work to reduce their incidence. We have suggested several strategies, but emphasize that it is important to first understand ethics problems in order to solve them effectively and to avoid wasting government resources. We encourage agencies to exercise wise judgment in deciding whether to use training or selection methods to try to shape the ethics of their workforce. It wastes time and money to train someone who is not conscientious to begin with. It also wastes time and money to replace an employee who means well, but simply misunderstands his or her job responsibilities. In all cases though, a detailed job analysis can help agencies see the kinds of ethical situations employees are likely to encounter and the critical abilities and competencies necessary to navigate such situations appropriately.

¹Available at <http://www.ethics.org/nbes/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/LargeCompaniesExecSummary.pdf>.

² Companies with 90,000 or more employees.
