

Ethical Competence: From farm to city.

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Ethical responsibility and competence have always been very important in my life. As a child I grew up with a very strong foundation of ethical values and that has been a gift that I am more thankful for as I get older and explore the world. While ethical competence is the ability to recognize an ethical conflict when you see it, ethical responsibility is being accountable for the decisions you make to all stakeholders, public and political¹. A farm girl no longer working on the farm learns quickly not everyone has the same values as she does and the challenges of incorporating her personal code of ethics in a career as a public administrator.

Since my job in a small association is multifaceted, I need to be aware of several ethical codes. It is important for me to be mindful of the ethical codes for advertising, websites and privacy, online publishing, print publishing and editing, and public relations as well as the ethical code for association managers. Another piece of my job is to manage our state chapter affiliates. Many of our chapter leaders are volunteers or are not association professionals by trade, so at times it is my job to offer advice or intervene if needed. In order for me to be able to advise our chapter leaders and be aware of liabilities our chapters have, it is important that I uphold the ethical conduct that I expect from our leaders.

Although we are a very small organization, there are multiple people that I serve daily. I first serve our executive director and our board of directors. Secondly, I serve our other staff, our members and the public. Since our organization is the American Mental Health Counselors Association, our public is primarily mental health counselors, organizations that employ mental health counselors, organizations that make products for

¹ Cooper, T. L. (Ed). (2013). Achieving Ethical Competence for Public Service Leadership. New York: Routledge

mental health counselors, and schools and professors that teach mental health counseling. Occasionally the general public sees our organization name and assumes that we have mental health counselors in our office so we also need to be mindful that people seeking mental health counseling may come to us seeking help.

In the communications management world, ethical competency is important to your reputation as well as having legal ramifications. Shortcuts such as copying and pasting from another website or downloading images without permission to use them are commonly done by those who do not have time to write their own content, cannot afford to purchase content, or are unaware of the laws and regulations regarding digital property. A competent communications manager fact checks, obeys privacy policies and terms of use policies, and edits all publications according to a set guideline. In my current position it has been my task to educate our staff and board members as well as chapter leaders of the ethical problems in taking such shortcuts. In once instance, soon after I began my current position, I found that an entire article that had been sent to me for editing was copied and pasted from another website whose terms of use policy forbade such practices without referencing their website. As a fix, I clearly labeled the entire article as coming from another website and added their recommended logos in several places. I am fully aware that the person who submitted the article probably did not have time to do the research on his own or is unaware of the laws and regulations. I now feel ethically responsible for fact checking everything that comes across my desk.

Not only am I a communications manager, I am also an association manager. In my role as manager of state chapter relations, I encounter multiple situations where incompetency puts entire associations at risk of legal action. As an example, one of our

chapter leaders was upset that our organization rented our membership list to third party vendors. For her, this was an unethical practice. I addressed the issue by pointing out that we disclose the fact that we rent our list out in our privacy policy on our website. In speaking with her I realized that her association's website did not have a privacy policy and I recommended that she create one. Upon digging a bit further I realized that not only did her organization not have a privacy policy, but she was also using the organization to promote her private business to the members of the association she was directing. This practice is illegal because the organization does not have a privacy policy in which the relationship between her business and the organization is made clear. As the manager of our chapters I informed my boss and our board of directors of the situation.

The above situation brings me to one of my summom bonums: integrity. As a child I was told stories of my grandfathers integrity and how important it was to carry on that legacy. There were times when people took advantage of my grandfather, however, he kept his integrity in tact and always did what he believed was right. As I've gotten older I have become incredibly grateful for the values that were instilled in me and have clung to those values in difficult times. For me, it is important that I not only exude integrity but also that I work for an organization of integrity. In the situation with one of our chapters, I felt that she was not only compromising the integrity of her private business but of the association that she was in charge of and by proxy, our parent association as well.

In my own personal ethical code, I try to always maintain integrity, respect, honesty, and dedication. I want to be a person of integrity as well as work for an organization that values integrity. I respect who I am and my experiences as well as other people and their experiences. Maintaining respect for those I work for as well as those who work for me is

something I strive for on a daily. Honesty and transparency go hand in hand for me. Often people tell me that I am someone in which “what you see is what you get”. I feel that this is a compliment to both my honesty and transparency and it is something I respect in other people and organizations. I believe that when we are honest about who we are and our abilities, we can come to better solutions. If someone lies to me and says they are able to do something they can't, I am unable to rely on them. Dedication is another tenet that makes up my ethical values. This value is another one that has been engrained in me from childhood. Growing up on a farm you see first hand the dedication needed to get things done and importance of not only finishing the job but doing a good job at it. In my life I struggle with dedication the most because it is impossible to be completely dedicated to every aspect of your life. I am first and foremost dedicated to my job and then to my education and my loved ones. It is difficult to parse out my dedication to multiple hobbies, a healthy lifestyle, a clean house, etc.

Bringing my ethical code to my job I want to ensure that I maintain my values. As a writer and editor, it is easy for me to edit aspects of another's work that I don't like, however, that would be disrespectful to the author and compromise my integrity as an editor. It is important for me to edit and then send the piece back to the author to accept or reject my edits before the piece is published. As a manager I want to be sure that I respect the laws and regulations as well as the public and the person I am managing. Not only am I ethically responsible to those who have fought to make the laws and regulations in order to protect everyone, but I am responsible for upholding those laws and doing my part to protect the public as well.