

BASIC TRAINING FOR EMPLOYEES



ETHICS IN THE WORKPLACE



INTRODUCTION

How ethical are you? Do you know everything employee ethics involves? It's more crucial than ever to have an ethical workplace, and you should know how to handle common ethical dilemmas you may face, both on and off the job. Essentially, you need to develop and refine your own "code of ethics."

It's very difficult to define ethics in the workplace. Generally, "being ethical" involves conducting yourself in accordance with accepted principles of right and wrong. Ethics is a matter of using integrity-based decision-making procedures to guide your decisions and actions. In the workplace, being ethical may involve acting morally right, being honest, not cheating your employer, co-workers, or customers, not stealing from the supply closet, and generally treating your co-workers well. Other ethical situations may involve harassment, inappropriate use of the Internet, outside-of-work activities, etc.

You probably already have a vague idea of what ethics entails. You generally know the difference between right and wrong and probably know there are certain things you should *never* do in the workplace. However, although some issues may be black and white, lots of ethical issues involve gray areas. Do you know what some of these issues are? Can you recognize "gray area" situations?

Employee ethics are extremely important to your employer — that's why your employer gave you this booklet, *Basic Training for Employees: Ethics in the Workplace*. The topic is so important that your employer bought the booklet and expects you to take the time to read through it.

The main purpose of this booklet is to help you increase your awareness of key ethical issues and to teach you how to make good decisions based on ethical principles. It should also clarify how you need to report possible ethical violations once you become aware of them and where you should go to seek advice on ethical issues.

After you're finished reading the booklet, put it on your shelf, desk, or work area where you can see it. It'll remind you to keep an eye out for potential sticky ethical dilemmas. And when you are unsure how to handle a particular ethical situation, look through this booklet to help you decide what to do.

THE NEED FOR ETHICS

If your workplace lacks ethical standards, your employer risks losing valuable employees and customers and possibly even more. Federal laws impose heavier penalties on employers convicted of criminal wrongdoing if they cannot prove that they've made efforts to implement ethical measures to prevent and deter illegal conduct.

Some of the primary forms of employee misconduct or unethical behavior include the following:

- ◆ Misrepresenting time or hours worked;
- ◆ Lying to supervisors;
- ◆ Lying to co-workers, customers, vendors, or the public;
- ◆ Misuse of your employer's assets; and
- ◆ Lying on reports or falsifying records.

As you can see, there is a widespread need for ethics in your workplace. A code of ethics can provide guidelines for your

conduct and help improve the overall atmosphere of your workplace. Your employer's workplace ethics policy deters employee misconduct, avoids conflicts of interest, helps keep you and your co-workers honest, provides you with guidelines for resolving sensitive issues, and helps make clear that all employees are responsible for their unethical behavior.

YOUR ROLE IN ETHICS

Never underestimate the role you play in implementing an ethical workplace. You may be surprised to learn that *you* are responsible for policing ethics in your workplace. This means you must be educated and informed on your employer's ethics policy and code of conduct. You must also be vigilant in watching out for ethical violations.

Think about it as being part of your job. That's right — it's part of your *job*. It's not just your boss's job and not just the role of your HR department or upper management. Much of the burden for preventing ethical violations falls on you because as an employee, you're in a strong position to know if an ethical breach occurs. After all, you often work very closely with your co-workers, which means you may be in a position to witness their ethical dilemmas or breaches when your supervisors are not.

You're not expected to be a police officer, judge, and jury all in one, but you are responsible for helping to create and maintain an ethical workplace, and this booklet is designed to help. Through your reading, you'll learn what workplace ethics covers (hint, more than you may think), what actions are ethical and unethical, and how to report potential violations.

ETHICS AFFECT MORE THAN YOU THINK

What are some common unethical behaviors in the workplace? What about your conduct outside the workplace — off your employer’s premises? Can your employer discipline or fire you for engaging in conduct away from the workplace that it considers to be incompatible with its values, ethics, or morals? What if you do something that’s illegal? When is your off-duty behavior none of your employer’s business and when is it a genuine threat to your employer’s business?

HARASSMENT

Harassment of any sort is a violation of your employer’s ethics policy and may also violate federal law. Illegal harassment can be based on **sex, race, color, religion, national origin, disability, or age**. Unfortunately, sexual harassment has become particularly widespread in today’s workplaces.

However, although you know sexual harassment is wrong and would be an ethical violation, what about consensual sexual relationship in your workplace? A romantic relationship between employees may not seem like a big deal at first. In fact, it may seem like a *good* idea. However, a workplace relationship can become a HUGE problem if the romance ends badly or the dating employees show favoritism toward each other.

Sure, sure — you might think that relationships between co-workers are bound to end in happily ever after for some people. OK, sometimes these relationships may actually work out, *but* the odds are stacked against you. Although you may be happy in the relationship when it first begins, the “honeymoon phase”

eventually wears off, and your relationship may end badly with a sexual harassment claim and lawsuit.

Consensual relationships that develop in the workplace are especially toxic if they involve a supervisor and a subordinate. This is because the supervisor has power over the subordinate and has the ability to affect the subordinate's future with your employer.

Our best advice if you want to start dating someone in your workplace (whether it's a co-worker or your supervisor): Don't do it! Although it may be tempting (especially since you are most likely around your co-workers 30 to 40 hours a week), it's better in the long run if you choose to date individuals outside your workplace and avoid such a sticky ethical dilemma.

INAPPROPRIATE INTERNET USE

Beware! One of the most common ethical violations may be something you do every day. What is it? We'll give you a hint — it involves your computer.

Nancy and Andy sitting in a tree...

Andy and Nancy are co-workers who began dating after sparks flew at the office holiday party. However, three months into the relationship, Nancy decided that Andy was too clingy and broke up with him.

Andy has not taken the break-up well and is constantly bothering Nancy at work. At first, he just kept relentlessly asking her to give him another chance, go get drinks with him, or talk with him outside in the parking lot. After Nancy repeatedly turned him down, Andy became very angry. He started making sexual comments toward and about Nancy in front of their co-workers. Nancy is also afraid Andy is following her home at night.

Andy and Nancy's circumstances are a good example of a situation where a romance ended badly and is affecting a workplace. Nancy is a likely candidate to make a sexual harassment complaint based on Andy's highly inappropriate and aggressive behavior.

**Pornography at work:
one of the quickest
ways to be out of a job**

It should go without saying that you should *never, ever* visit pornography sites at work or on a work-issued computer. This would violate your employer's Internet usage policy and would undoubtedly be unethical behavior. Your employer would not tolerate such conduct, and you would likely find yourself back in the job market very quickly.

Abusing your employer's Internet usage policy is most likely an ethics violation. Are you constantly surfing the web during your workday? Are you addicted to news, gambling, shopping, or social networking sites? Does your addiction carry over into the workplace?

Social networking and blogs.

Social networking websites and blogs are Internet sensations that have exploded onto the online scene. You may have personal blogs and/or Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter accounts that you *must* check and update every day. But do you have any business updating your profile, tweeting, or adding new blog entries at work? Probably not, unless it's part of your job.

Your employer most likely has policies on personal Internet use and may address social networking and blogging. Make sure you are familiar with your employer's policy and follow it carefully. The following guidelines may be helpful in making sure your online communications are appropriate and do not violate any ethical standards:

- ◆ Blog or use social networking sites on your own personal time, not on your employer's time or on your employer's equipment.
- ◆ Don't disclose any of your employer's confidential or proprietary information or any trade secrets.