The Relevance of Professional

E T H I C S

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We all have a fairly good idea of what "being ethical" means, based on our own experiences, values, and beliefs. Ethics is relevant to every major social problem facing the world today and influences decisions made by individuals, businesses, and nonprofits. Yet we still struggle with how to apply ethical principles to our daily work. As Linda Tyre, CVA, observes: "Ethics involves our attitudes and our interaction with people. . . .Everything we do as a volunteer resources manager brings in our ethical beliefs or values." >>

PERSONAL VS. PROFESSIONAL ETHICS?

Where is the distinction between one's own personal ethics and the ethics, standards and policies of an organization or profession? These general definitions may be helpful as a start:

- *Values*: core beliefs that guide actions
- *Ethics*: a particular code of values
- *Collective Standards*: particular methods of practice
- *Code of Ethics*: formal rules that govern behavior of a group
- *Policies*: guidelines for behavior in particular situations

In an organization or profession, ethics is a system of rules or principles of behavior within a group against which actions can be judged. This system must be agreed upon by all members of the group to ensure consistency of action. The minute we become part of an established group of people, individual personal values are not enough to define what behavior will or will not be acceptable or tolerated. Definitions of right and wrong may vary, even if the group is composed of individuals who all consider themselves to be ethical. Michael Josephson, founder of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, says it this way:

> *If we conclude that ethics is purely a personal matter, and that each person's private code of values is entitled to equal respect regardless of the content of their beliefs, there is no legitimate basis for distinguishing between Saddam Hussein and Mother Teresa—both live up to their own standards.*

One of the hallmarks of being a professional is to commit to upholding a recognized code of ethics related to that particular field of activity. AVA has established a set of principles regarding the ethical involvement and management of volunteers and ethical practice is regarded as a core competency. Therefore, those who earn the CVA credential have signed a statement affirming their intent to honor these ethical standards in their work.

This does not mean we ignore the "I" in professional ethics. Although one's personal beliefs and values may become secondary to the organization's code of ethics, standards, or policies, each individual is still accountable. In this context, "being ethical" means never abdicating responsibility for the decisions we make. Carol Olsen, CVA, sums it up this way: "Being ethical,

both personally and professionally, involves honesty, respect and always 'doing the right thing' even when that choice is hard and not necessarily the most popular choice."

UNIVERSAL VALUES

Many years of international research have created strong evidence that people everywhere articulate some version of the same five core values:

- *Trustworthiness* (truthfulness, sincerity, candor, loyalty, promise keeping, honesty)
- *Respect* (autonomy, courtesy)
- *Responsibility* (diligence, continuous improvement, self-restraint)
- *Justice* (fairness, impartiality, equity)
- *Caring* (kindness, compassion)

These universal values become the basis for creating a common set of ethical principles that can be applied when searching for "the right thing to do." These principles are different from program policies or standards. They are rules of engagement that focus on interpersonal interactions rather than operational procedures and articulate a general set of values that can be applied to many different situations. These five core values are at the heart of our profeassional ethics in volunteer administration as well.

An organizational "code of ethics" provides a framework or roadmap that everyone can refer to when challenging ethical dilemmas arise. There are numerous benefits of implementing a code of ethics in any organization. Basing management practices and decisions on these core ethical values will result in a program that:

- Is accessible to diverse groups and individuals
- Attracts volunteers, donors, and supporters
- Strives for excellence
- Maintains the public trust
- Sustains a helping environment
- Is at a lower risk for legal actions against the organization

Of course, functioning as an ethical organization requires more than posting a code of ethics on the office wall. The code must be within every employee and every volunteer. There must be consistent modeling from the top, through the actions and words of board members and executive staff. There must be encouragement for staff and volunteers to speak up if they observe unethical behavior among colleagues. There must be opportunities for safe and open

discussion of ethical questions and issues. Integrity is defined as the compatibility between actions and values. Such an organizational culture lowers the barriers to ethical decision-making and permeates all aspects of operation.

MAKING IT REAL

How does all this theory relate to the real work of volunteer management? Here are a few examples of actual ethical dilemmas:

- You become aware of a vehicle in an agency motor pool that is not being maintained well. You have received complaints from volunteers and have heard the staff make jokes about trying to avoid using that particular vehicle. The staff person in charge of the motor pool is a very good friend of an influential donor to your agency.
- One of your agency's board members has heard rumors that one of your volunteer mentors had a skirmish with the law and had
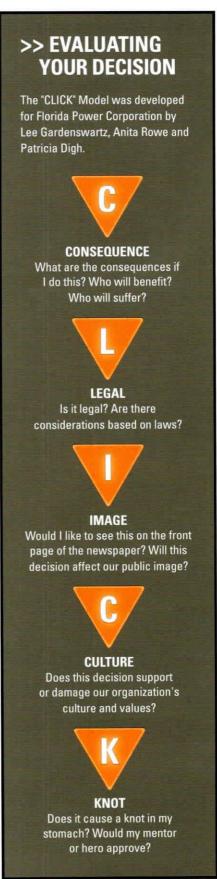
> "Moral courage is the quality of mind and spirit that enables one to face up to ethical dilemmas and moral wrongdoings firmly and confidently, without flinching or retreating."

to appear in court. The board member asks you to confirm this information and says the volunteer should be dismissed if it is true.

- Your executive director asks you to coordinate a planning process that gets volunteers more involved in the workings of your organization. However, you strongly suspect that this is nothing more than a token gesture, and doubt that any of the recommendations suggested by volunteers will be implemented or taken seriously.
- A hospice volunteer invites a client to stay in the volunteer's family home when the patient's living situation becomes complicated.

Do you know how you would handle each of these situations in an ethical manner? When these situations arise it is important to have peers with whom you can have confidential conversations to explore your options. Steve Schultz, CVA, agrees: "Find a few highly ethical people who can mentor you. Involve them in your decision-making, and learn from their experiences." Remember that ethics guide not only what we do, but how we do it. In the final analysis, "walking the talk" consistently over time demands that our decision-making skills include:

- *Competence*—the ability to recognize an ethical issue when it appears

>> EVALUATING YOUR DECISION

The "CLICK" Model was developed for Florida Power Corporation by Lee Gardenswartz, Anita Rowe and Patricia Digh.

C

CONSEQUENCE
What are the consequences if I do this? Who will benefit? Who will suffer?

L

LEGAL
Is it legal? Are there considerations based on laws?

I

IMAGE
Would I like to see this on the front page of the newspaper? Will this decision affect our public image?

C

CULTURE
Does this decision support or damage our organization's culture and values?

K

KNOT
Does it cause a knot in my stomach? Would my mentor or hero approve?

Identify colleagues who will serve as your "sounding board" to help you navigate through an ethical dilemma when it arises; use each other as a mutual support system.

- *Confidence*—the assurance and self-esteem to seek out different points of view rather than making the decision alone
- *Tough-mindedness*—the strength to ultimately make a decision and act even though there is no guarantee that it is the absolute "right" decision.

There are "tests" we can apply to help us evaluate the decisions we make (see side bar box on the "CLICK" test), but ultimately it comes down to a matter of courage. "Moral courage is the quality of mind and spirit that enables one to face up to ethical dilemmas and moral wrongdoings firmly and confidently, without flinching or retreating," states Rushworth Kidder, founder and president of the Institute for Global Ethics. Our work certainly demands such moral courage, making ethics a cornerstone that is intensely personal, practical, and relevant.

IDEAS FOR ACTION
- Use AVA's *Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration* as a practical guidebook when faced with an ethical dilemma.
- Devote time to the topic at a local meeting of your volunteer resources managers.
- Role-play some scenarios; identify possible courses of action; discuss how the process feels, as well as the implications of decisions.
- Identify colleagues who will serve as your "sounding board" to help navigate you through an ethical dilemma when it arises; use each other as a mutual support system.
- Establish a task force of volunteers, staff, and board members to develop a code of ethics for your organization based on the five universal core values. Include a discussion of volunteer management ethics in orientation for new staff and volunteers.
- Devote 15 minutes at each board or staff meeting to focus on one ethical principle; identify ways in which the organization is honoring that principle, or needs to improve.

These action items will make a difference! VM