

Ethics

By David Grouchy

Public officials from the White House to local agencies are often in the news for ethical issues. A number protest their innocence. Ethics can make or break a career. It's important to know what's involved as ethics can be confusing. There are many stories about people getting into trouble. This article will provide a few simple rules to stay out of trouble.

Salary and other compensation, such as vacation and sick leave, belong to the employee for doing their job. Some people feel that they don't get paid enough. If this is true, talk to the boss, apply for a raise or promotion, or look elsewhere. Employees cannot accept anything of value for "just for doing the job." They cannot accept favors from people who have pursued or are pursuing a contract with the agency.

It is ok to be friendly with contractor or consultant. More work gets done in a cooperative relationship than in an adversarial one. But be careful! Employees attending sporting events or any entertainment, should pay their own way. It is usually alright to socialize with people who have contracts with the town or city, but don't accept gifts or favors. Employees playing golf or going fishing with a contractor, should pay their own greens fees and share of the cost of the fishing trip.

Doing the job. Competence is an area of concern for public employees. People should do work that they are qualified for. Employees should not do work outside their area of expertise unless it is considered training and are supervised by an instructor or competent person. The most ethical thing a supervisor can do is to let their people do the work. Don't micromanage, second guess or take authority away from subordinates.

Don't hire family. Most public works agencies restrict family members from working closely with each other. This may be difficult if promoted to an area where a relative works. Check with human resources or the state ethics board before accepting a promotion. Ask, so others will know everything is above board. In private industry, it is OK to hire family, the public sector is different and the rules are not so liberal.

Unfortunately, people are quick to believe that public employees are incompetent or dishonest. Don't associate with unethical behavior. One's reputation is precious and very difficult to recover once it has been damaged.

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