



## Ethical Behavior for Today's Workplace

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### Introduction

**In these troubled times rife with examples of corporate, institutional, and personal misbehavior**, it is sometimes difficult for us to determine just what is an ethical response. When we read about the collapse of such corporate powerhouses as Enron and about celebrities such as Martha Stewart or in headlines of colleges and universities disclosing recruiting violations in athletics, researchers intentionally publishing erroneous or misleading results, presidents and other officers being accused of sexual harassment or misusing funds, it is little wonder that we are sometimes confused on how best to perform our duties and responsibilities. However, despite all that we see occurring around us, we can and should live our personal and professional lives in a manner that models high ethical standards at all times.

What are the "rules of the road" in this challenging environment? Whether our role is president of the institution or as a worker in an office that serves students we are responsible for our own behavior as well as setting standards that inspire others to behave ethically. We must be consistent in our responses to everyday events as well as to dilemmas and challenges and base our actions on the standard of ethics that we have developed.

So what are those ethical standards? Of course much has been written about ethical behavior and standards. Aristotle had much to offer us regarding the virtues of an ethical person and he considered bravery, truthfulness, justice and generosity to be the greatest attributes a person could observe and internalize (Aristotle, ed 1985). A more modern perspective is offered by Stephen R. Covey in his book "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" as well as others who cite courage, honesty, fairness, and empathy as being traits necessary for ethical behavior (Covey, 1989). In his book "Leadership," Rudolph

W. Giuliani, mayor of New York City on September 11, 2001, gives us his thoughts on what characteristics set great ethical leaders apart from others (Giuliani, 2002). The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) as well as the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) give us codes of ethics to guide our behavior in our everyday professional work. Individuals also apply the standards of ethics that they have acquired through their faith and personal belief system.

This article will briefly discuss standards of ethics in the context of situations we frequently encounter during our daily interactions with students and co-workers. Brief “real life” sketches will provide context for discussion. While by no means meant to be a definitive or all-inclusive review of any particular code of ethics, this article will strive to give the reader some thought provoking examples and concepts to consider applying in the execution of his or her duties and responsibilities.

Where shall we begin? It would seem appropriate to talk about our personal habits. Not the personal habits that drive our significant other and children crazy, but the habits of excellence – of knowing almost by instinct how and when to take action because we have practiced habits of ethical behavior.

## Creating Habits of Excellence

**“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit”**

Aristotle

During his administration, Rudi Giuliani stated that he prepared for crisis by imagining the absolute worst situation possible and then documenting the steps and actions that would be necessary to deal with the situation. As a consequence when two jets slammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, Giuliani and his team already had in place plans that could be implemented in a short amount of time. Giuliani is the first to acknowledge that the outcome was not what he wished and prayed for but firmly believes that the results could have been far worse had not he and his team been prepared for the worst and had created habits to rely on when that awful day’s events occurred. Giuliani and his team were able to lead and communicate with the people of New York almost immediately and most likely prevented mass panic (Giuliani, 2002). In responding to crisis or problems, our first reactions are typically the ones we have practiced. If we react in a manner that is ethical and honorable, most likely it is because we have internalized a strong ethical system of standards and behaviors.

In the same way, developing habits based on courage, integrity, fairness, and generosity prepare the leader for ethical responses to moral dilemmas and situations that require immediate action. So, how do these traits apply to our every day life at home and at work?



## Courage

A professor completes his review of a student's capstone thesis, knowing that the student had plagiarized others' works in his writing. The professor knows he must confront the student and inform the Student Conduct Office of the academic dishonesty, all the while knowing that to take the necessary action may result in that student not graduating on time, if at all. However he knows that if he were to allow such behavior to go unpunished he would be in effect condoning the student's dishonest behavior.

Holding out against the repeated requests to "bend the rules" so that the granddaughter of one of the college's most significant donors could be admitted even though she does not have the academic qualifications will very likely not win the Director of Admissions friends in the Foundation Office. Yet, the Director knows that to admit the student would diminish the accomplishments of the students who were admitted on their academic qualifications. The Director is not looking forward to her next encounter with the Vice President of the Foundation.

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about courage? Is it being fearless when confronted with danger? Could be. Is it acting with bravery if the going gets rough? That too can be considered being courageous. Courage is also demonstrated when difficult decisions must be made and communicated to employees or others to whom we are responsible, such as our students. Courage is taking a stand and speaking out on issues that are controversial or sensitive, even when the majority is willing to "let it pass." It takes great courage to tell the truth, especially when there is no one who wants to hear the truth or who is willing to back you up when you speak the truth. It also takes courage to protect the underdog, the underrepresented, or the most vulnerable in our community. And, perhaps the most difficult, is to have the courage to reveal our own fears and concerns when a "stiff upper lip" would be easier.

Turning back to the Enron collapse, her life would have been much easier had Sherron Watkins ignored the misbehavior of Enron's corporate executives and "just did her job." However, Watkins understood the enormity of the implications of the accounting practices that can at best be called questionable and in trying to guilt Kenneth Lay into doing the right thing, jeopardized her own career and professional credibility. Watkins courageously took a stand when many others in the company were turning a blind eye to the corporate misbehavior going on around them.

We all know courageous individuals and perhaps wonder if we could display as much courage in the face of adversity. Giuliani, as have many others, suggests that great leaders display courage. He goes on to say that strong beliefs are critical components for great courage (Giuliani, 2002). Courageous people are able to create a vision of the future, a time beyond the current adversity, for themselves and others, and can thus act in a manner to bring that vision to reality. Further, when acting on their vision, courageous people are acting on their belief system. The ACPA code of ethics exhorts student affairs professionals to adopt a professional lifestyle that is based on sound theoretical principles and a personal belief system that exemplifies the best practices of the profession (ACPA, 1999). A strong personal belief system can sustain us in a time of difficulty and stress when we know that the action needed is not going to be easy or popular. As a professional in higher education, we have encountered situations that are not pleasant or easy.

While the situations described at the beginning of this section certainly suggested that the individuals involved acted courageously, it also required that they act with honesty and integrity.



## Integrity

As the Registrar is calculating graduation honors in preparation for the upcoming commencement, the Provost drops by to share his desire to see a certain student recognized for her outstanding academic achievement and talks glowingly of the student's many accomplishments while at the University. After the Provost leaves, the Registrar reviews the student's record and discovers that the student, a transfer from another institution, will be short five credits of the required number to receive graduation honors. The Registrar knows that if he just

goes ahead and awards the graduation honor that it would not be very likely that anyone else would realize the student had not satisfied the residency requirement for the graduation honor but knows that it would be dishonest and unfair to the students who will rightfully receive the graduation honor. He picks up the phone and makes the call to the Provost.

While preparing her annual report of institutional aid awarded to students of color, the Financial Aid Director realizes that the numbers of students choosing to not report their racial identity has increased significantly over previous years' numbers. Although troubled by the increase in the numbers of students who did not report their ethnicity or race, the Director knows the President will be unhappy if the report shows a decline in the numbers of students of color being served by the Financial Aid Office. The Director pulls out the previous year's report and considers revising the current percentages to more closely align with last years', thinking all the while that the numbers of students not reporting is surely a data entry error that can be easily fixed when there is more time. However, after giving the matter more thought, the Director prepares the report with the current lower numbers but attaches a note that suggests research is needed to determine why students are reluctant to report their ethnicity and race.

An African proverb tells us "One falsehood spoils a thousand truths," and because honesty is the basis of integrity it is imperative that we be truthful in our day-to-day conduct. Certainly, our trustworthiness as well as our integrity is measured by the honesty, or the absence of honesty, that we practice each and every day, but as the examples above suggest, it is not easy to act with integrity.

Think of the people you value for their integrity. What are some traits that you notice in these individuals? Do you consider them to be loyal? Committed to their institutions, their staff, and their beliefs? Is their management style effective in developing staff to their fullest potential without taking personal credit for the work of their staff? Are they trusted by their staff and colleagues? The foundation of all of these wonderful traits is, most likely, an unquestioned honesty that everyone around them recognizes and acknowledges. These are the kinds of people we generally want on our team; because we know they can be counted on for their integrity.

Each of the situations described above is relatively common and yet how the individual resolves the problem reflects not only his or her own code of ethics but also the norm for behavior at the respective institution. The institutional culture frequently determines how people are treated and whether or not policy and practice are applied equally to all, but the ethical leader will work to ensure that everyone is treated fairly.

## Fairness

**“This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a good place for all of us to live in.”**

*— Theodore Roosevelt, American adventurer and 26th president (1858-1919)*

An Enrollment Management Team is assessing the current criteria for admission and scholarship eligibility. Knowing that research shows that low-income students and families are disproportionately underrepresented when financial means tests are not included in the criteria used to evaluate students for admission and/or scholarship, the Team works toward establishing policies and processes that will include socioeconomic factors in the evaluation criteria. The Team is pleased that the new policies are designed with the intent of awarding all deserving students including low-income students.

The Career Services Director is contacted by a recruiting firm that wants to set up a table at the upcoming career fair and offers a \$10,000 contribution to the career services office for future workshops. However, when checking out the firm the Director discovers that this particular recruiting firm has a track record of discriminating against women and students of color in their placements. While the Director would very much like to accept the contribution and would use it for her “Dress for Success” program that benefits all students, she is reluctant to allow the recruiting firm to come to campus because of the unfair way they have treated some students in the past.

Perhaps one characteristic that people recognize most quickly in an ethical leader is fairness. The leader who displays fairness in his or her interactions with others usually listens to others with empathy, recognizing the worth and value of the speaker’s concerns, opinions, or questions. They display courtesy, trust, and respect for all whom they encounter. And yet we know them to be firm and principled in their dealings with others. They are not gullible or easily swayed from their ethical center. Being consistent is an important aspect of being fair, especially in the treatment of others. When an ethical leader makes a decision relative to the treatment of an individual, very likely the leader is looking beyond the individual standing in front of him or her and is thinking how this decision could impact others who will come with the same or a similar problem or situation in the future. The ethical leader always carefully considers whether the solution can be applied universally.

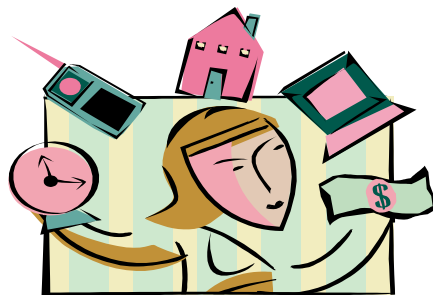
Universality is fundamental to most educators. The ACPA code of ethics asks student affairs professionals to be committed to assuring that all individuals be treated fairly and equitably and whether our respective offices are in the Student Affairs side of the institution or the academic wing, we are to do all in our power to ensure that all students are treated equally. To be able to treat all in an equitable manner requires an appreciation for the differences that are found in

individuals and groups of people. An ethical leader will promote tolerance and understanding rather than encouraging bigotry and intolerance.

One of the outcomes of decision-making is whether the result was fair to all. In his book "Leadership," Giuliani says that decision-making that would make everyone happy would be easy if there were always choices that benefited everyone (Giuliani, 2002). However, that is rarely the kind of choices we are given and the decisions we must make often benefits one individual over another or one group over another and even then, the decision may be an imperfect remedy for all concerned. It is up to the decision-maker to provide an explanation for the choice he or she has made – not for the purpose of convincing those impacted by the decision that the decision was the perfect solution but, in the face of the facts, that the decision was the fairest solution possible. A leader known for his/her equitable treatment of those to whom he or she is responsible will be able to face even the most vocal of opponents.

Yet, acting in a fair manner but without generosity can lead to a sterile environment.

## Generosity



**Generosity is always  
putting other peoples'  
wants and needs before  
your own.**

Anon

A year ago, the Vice President for Enrollment Management was asked by the President to diversify the staff as vacancies occur. The VP knew that several positions would become vacant over the year and had been encouraging several of the current staff to prepare for these higher level positions. He had hoped to fill the vacancies with the current staff, which would allow him to promote committed and loyal employees into the positions. However, the VP also recognized the benefits of increasing the diversity of the staff for the sake of the entire staff and for the students the Enrollment Services Offices served. The VP spent the year conducting workshops and seminars on diversity and working with the staff to help them realize for themselves the need to more broadly diversify the staff. When the anticipated vacancies occurred, the VP advertised the positions in journals and newspapers read by professionals of color.

A busy Assistant Registrar is asked by a new staff member in the office to mentor her as a new professional. At first the Assistant Registrar declines saying that the requirements of her job leaves her too little time to help anyone else. However, after thinking about it, the Assistant Registrar invites the new staff member into her office and after apologizing for her hasty response, offers to help the new staff member by including her in meetings and to meet with her once a week to talk about the profession.

We've all heard the old saw about the guy who was so generous he gave away the shirt off his own back or of taking the last dollar out of his own wallet when he saw someone in need. Perhaps we even consider that kind of behavior being generous to a fault. However, generosity encompasses so much more than our material possessions and the ethical leader works to find ways to be generous with his/her time, knowledge and skill, and positive attitude. It is this type of generosity that is the hallmark of a principled individual.

In our busy lives it is easy to hide behind voicemail or email or even our work; to put off people and their problems; to avoid making the decisions that need to be made and communicated to others; or to avoid even thinking about the direction our own personal and professional lives are heading. However, it is in exactly these hurried times that it is most important to give the time, attention, and effort to our support staff, to our friends and colleagues, and yes, to ourselves. We cannot be models of ethical leadership until we have taken the time to prepare and develop our internal standards and then apply those standards to the situations that require us to be at our best.



### **Concluding Thoughts**

While there is no way we can anticipate all of the different types of situations and dilemmas we will face as educators and professionals, we can prepare ourselves by internalizing high standards and developing habits of behavior that will ensure that we react and respond in a manner that observes the tenets of ethical leadership. Each day we are called on to make decisions and are presented with situations that require us to take action. We know every

decision and reaction leads not only to short-term results but may have much longer-term implications. This should give us reason to pause to consider whether or not our decision can be applied to other similar situations in the future. Developing the habit of future thinking can provide us with a perspective that not only prevents shortsighted impulsive and reactionary behavior but gives us an opportunity to develop a sense of consistency and continuity in our leadership.

The brief examples of everyday situations given to illustrate integrity, courage, fairness and generosity are by no means inclusive of the many types of ethical conflicts that we encounter in performing our jobs, nor are these examples particularly complex, but hopefully provide a starting point for the important work of looking within ourselves to determine where our belief systems and personal code of ethics may need strengthening. There are many excellent sources of inspiration all around us, whether it is an individual we admire or found in one of the many texts and popular publications on the market. The important thing is to take the time to examine, prepare, and practice a strong code of ethics – creating habits of excellence for ourselves and those we work with.

Our staff and our students deserve only the best from us – it is our job to prepare for that responsibility.

**Lose your wealth and you've lost  
nothing. Lose your health and you've  
lost something. Lose your character  
and you've lost everything.**

~Ben Lapadula~

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