



ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF LEADERSHIP - QUICK TIPS

ETHICS

A coherent system of conscious beliefs involving principles, justice, integrity, and morals

Ethics are Critical

From research lapses to uneven grading to conflicts of interest, ethical issues abound in higher education. Institutional integrity relies on individual ethical conduct and an internal culture, reinforced by leaders, that focuses on institutional mission and values. Lapses damage the culture and identity of an institution, and can cause donors and constituents to question the very mission, and jeopardize it in and beyond the institution.

An Ethical Culture Begins with You

- Knowing and being able to articulate your own values is where it all begins. Do you know, and can you talk comfortably about what you do, why you do it, and what values guide your conduct?
- Research shows that ethical units have ethical leaders who walk their talk: people draw meaning from actions more than words. What you do is more important than what you say.
- Consistently hold yourself and others accountable. Consideration of ethical implications must be incorporated into every decision.
- Talking regularly about making principled decisions in the best interests of the institution helps provides context and reinforcement when those around you make choices in the course of their professional duties that will reflect back upon the institution.
 - ➔ Be open and address regularly the ethical components of the decisions that you make.
 - ➔ Accept that others may not always agree with your analysis or conclusions.
 - ➔ As a leader, people will watch you for cues. Consider the symbolism of how you spend your visible time.
- Making connections between your words and your actions should become a habit. Talk about mission, principles, and values to set the tone in your unit.
 - ➔ Remember, authority amplifies everything you say, so speak carefully and take care to loop back and monitor that your words and actions are received as you intended.
 - ➔ Incorporate institutional mission and values into your public comments, speeches, and the personal scripts you use regularly.
- Take personal responsibility for the ethical impact of your decisions.
- Few people will want to do something simply because you think it's a good idea or because it will make you look good. The goals and plans your faculty and staff set for themselves are based on what they know is rewarded by the institution. Explain to them how the initiatives you propose or actions you ask for will help them to fulfill their objectives and align with the institutional mission and goals.

UNIT ETHICS
begin with leadership





Ethical Challenges: Difficult Situations

- **Confidentiality** requirements can complicate perceptions of ethics. Sometimes you will want to explain what you did and why, and you will not be able to do so because such a decision itself may violate others' right to privacy/confidentiality (e.g., the results of an internal investigation or disciplinary action).
- **Conflicts of loyalties** between your own feelings and your duty can be particularly painful personally.
 - ➔ Perhaps you have been longtime colleagues and friends with a member of your unit, and have become leader of the unit. This role may require you to make a decision for the good of the unit that will make a friend unhappy. There are many such decisions that can be uncomfortable:
 - ▶ to close a program
 - ▶ hire someone other than supported/advocated for by your friend/colleague
 - ▶ not tenure/promote someone (either your friend personally or a protégé of your friend)
 - ▶ not provide a raise (to your friend or to friend's protégé or ally)
 - ▶ withdraw or not provide space or funding for a project
 - ▶ disagree on a strategic direction
 - ▶ withhold info you cannot ethically share
- **Carrying out decisions from above that you advocated against.** It can be challenging to find a way to move forward with integrity. The hardest can be the assumption of those who were not privy to your arguments who will assume and/or hold you accountable for a choice that was not your own. Develop a way to speak about it that maintains your integrity, speak truthfully, and sometimes more minimally than may be comfortable. If you feel strongly enough about not carrying out the decision, sometimes your best choice may be to resign. With care, this should be relatively rare.
- **The prospect of personal gain (through position, reputation, or finance—your own conflicts of interest)** can tempt bad choices. In academia, personal financial gain is usually not the challenge. The more frequent challenge arises when a particular decision would advance your personal or professional strategic agenda, show your leadership positively, or support those you are affiliated with, whether personally or professionally. Conflicts of interest, especially at institutions that provide 12 month appointments, can arise for academics when exceeding guidelines for consulting engagements or spending significant time working for another academic institution without obtaining approval from their home institution. The motivation is often access to research resources or financial gain.
- **Choosing between short-term gain versus long-term interests of the unit** can present ethical dilemmas. A decision you are contemplating may not have negative repercussions during your tenure with the unit. The "easy way out" is often expedient and a defensible option; the ethical challenge arises when you know that a different decision is in the longer-

ETHICAL CHALLENGES

Confidentiality requirements

Loyalty conflicts

Decisions with which you disagree

Personal gain

Short vs long term outcomes

Passing blame





term best interest of the unit. In business, leaders all too often make decisions that enhance short term profits (and individual annual stock options) and at the same time are to the detriment of the long-term health of the firm.

- **Placing blame** on a subordinate when you know responsibility for a bad decision was yours alone or for which you shared a considerable responsibility.
- **Claiming reimbursements** for expenses, meals, travel, and using institutional funds for office furnishings, etc. should be areas in which to take particular care. Missteps in these areas are visible and a source of trouble for many leaders. Undercharge when in doubt.
- **Contracting and purchasing** can be problematic if family/friends are involved, even when they might be ideally suited, given the appearance of conflicts or favoritism.

Confidantes

- Discussing difficult ethical decisions can help you find perspective. Finding the right people to do this safely is important.
- Seek a wise mentor who is professionally able to (and does!) maintain confidences with whom to review challenging choices and to hear objective views, and devils-advocate perspectives. This may mean, for some categories of information, confiding only in one who either has access to the information at issue or is legally able to protect confidences, such as someone in your reporting chain, a legal advisor, a therapist or religious advisor.
- Members of your unit are inappropriate confidantes. While they may have more context and local information than external resources, confiding in them can create other significant challenges, and breach ethical boundaries.
- Peers in other units and other institutions can be helpful at times if you are not breaching confidentiality or spreading private information in identifiable ways.

