



John M. Buell

Ethics and Leadership

Setting the right tone and structure can help others in their decision making.

Healthcare executives regularly encounter a variety of ethical issues—from organizational issues, such as interactions with suppliers, to the complex clinical issues of end-of-life patient care decisions. To ensure these wide-ranging ethical decisions are being made effectively and in the best interest of patients, employees and the community, healthcare leaders need to set the ethical tone of the organization.

Leaders can begin by establishing a systematic approach to ethics so when ethical issues do occur, the organization's actions to address them match its core values. To do this, leaders should identify and discuss specific ethical challenges, determine how to approach them and provide practical insights to help maintain and enhance ethical performance.

These were some of the recommendations given at a recent program funded in part by the American College of Healthcare Executives' philanthropic initiative the Fund for Innovation in Healthcare Leadership. Established in 2006 to bring innovation to the forefront of healthcare leadership, the Fund has made ethics one of its priorities.

The half-day ethics program, titled "Rising to the Ethical Challenges of Healthcare Leadership," was held last fall in conjunction with ACHE's educational cluster in Scottsdale, Ariz., and included ethics experts Paul B. Hofmann, DrPH, FACHE, president of the Hofmann Healthcare Group, Moraga, Calif., and William A. Nelson, PhD, director, Rural Ethics Initiatives, and associate professor of psychiatry and community and family medicine at Dartmouth Medical School, Hanover, N.H.

The program also included two healthcare panelists: Larry E. Volkmar, CEO, Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center, Phoenix, and Ruth W. Brinkley, RN, FACHE, president and CEO, Carondelet Health Network, Tucson, Ariz.

Program presenters and panelists discussed that ethics is about making the right choice in the face of competing values. To tackle ethical challenges successfully, says Hofmann, an ethics leader will display at least the following six specific behavioral traits:

1. Ethically conscious—Have an appreciation for the ethical dimensions and implications of one's daily actions and decisions or, as described by author John Worthley, the "ethics of the ordinary."
2. Ethically committed—Be completely devoted to doing the right thing. Leaders can be aware of a decision's ethical aspects but may consciously disregard or discount them.
3. Ethically competent—Demonstrate what Rushworth M. Kidder, PhD, president and founder of the Institute for Global Ethics, calls "ethical fitness," or having the knowledge and understanding required to make ethically sound decisions.
4. Ethically courageous—Act upon these competencies even when the action may not be accepted with enthusiasm or endorsement.
5. Ethically consistent—Establish and maintain a high ethical standard without making or rationalizing inconvenient exceptions. This means being able to rebuff the pressures to equivocate, to accommodate and to justify an action or a decision that is ethically flawed.
6. Ethically candid—Be open and forthright about the complexity of reconciling conflicting values, be willing to ask uncomfortable questions and be an active, not a passive, advocate of ethical analysis and ethical conduct.

In addition to demonstrating ethical leadership in one's actions and decisions, the presenters emphasized that

healthcare leaders must establish, support and use a comprehensive ethics infrastructure in their organizations.

Traditional ethics programs tend to be case-based, reactive, and clinically and inpatient focused, says Nelson. They tend to lack an organizational focus and system-oriented approach. Furthermore, adds Nelson, traditional ethics programs accept the recurring nature of ethical conflicts with detrimental effects on the organization such

as diminished quality of care, poor patient satisfaction and public relations, increased cost and lower staff morale.

Nelson says ethics programs should evolve to better establish ethical healthcare practices throughout the organization, educate staff regarding ethical behavior and evaluate the implementation of ethical practices. In addition, an effective ethics infrastructure should address the expanded healthcare environment

and apply a proactive approach—using quality improvement methods for enhancing both clinical and administrative ethical practices.

To foster an ethical organization, Nelson recommends developing, implementing and regularly reviewing the organization's mission, value statement and code of ethics, which guide planning, decision making and employee actions. Also critical are building an ethical culture through

Ethics Awareness

Following are three under-recognized ethical issues you may not have thought about:

Promoting Unrealistic Expectations

Like any other organization, a hospital or health system wants to present to its community a positive image. But if it unintentionally creates a perception on the part of the public that it can do more than it can deliver, that is a disservice to the community and to the people who trust the organization.

“This is disingenuous at the very least, even if the objective is well intended,” says Hofmann. “Our institutional credibility and integrity both within and outside the organization are at risk if we do.”

Healthcare organizations that overpromise and underdeliver do so mainly because of competitive reasons. By being overzealous, organizations can create certain expectations. “It's better to

underpromise and overdeliver,” says Hofmann.

Rationalizing Inappropriate or Incompetent Behavior

All levels of the organization—board, management and medical staff—should focus on this issue. It is difficult and sometimes painful to deal with individuals who are behaving or performing in a way that is inappropriate, whether it is sexual harassment or someone who is not managing his or her staff effectively.

Tolerating inappropriate behavior or incompetency can cause variations in medical care, which can have a detrimental effect on quality of care and patient safety, says Hofmann. Tolerance also sends the message to staff that inappropriate behavior and incompetency are acceptable. “The stress on employees can be seen in missed time at work and staff turnover,” he says.

Failing to Acknowledge Mistakes

When mistakes are made in healthcare organizations, lives may be at risk, according to Hofmann. Until mistakes are admitted, they cannot be corrected and prevented from occurring again. In cases of medical errors, they need to be disclosed to patients and their families, an apology must be given and the steps that will be taken to avoid similar mistakes must be outlined and communicated.

Ethical mistakes, says Hofmann, are not intentional, but healthcare managers are sometimes guilty of creating the illusion that because they are managers they have all the answers. By demonstrating proper humility, you can and should acknowledge your fallibility when a mistake is made.

employee selection, orientation and performance evaluation and providing staff with venues to discuss and resolve ethical concerns and conflicts.

Another key step, according to Nelson, is development of a fully integrated ethics committee with stronger ties to the organization's leadership, a broader scope, more visibility and greater accountability. With these ethics strategies, he says, "instead of putting out fires, healthcare leaders are more likely to prevent fires from ever starting."

With processes and procedures in place, leaders and staff will have the tools to make effective decisions no matter what the ethical circumstance.

Ethics Resources

The presenters pointed to ACHE's ethics resources as a means to support the development of an integrated ethics approach in healthcare organizations. Affiliates of ACHE commit to upholding ACHE's *Code of Ethics*. In addition, ACHE's Ethical Policy Statements, which can be found on ache.org, present ACHE's position on various ethical issues in healthcare and suggest a guideline of behavior. Topics include the following:

- Considerations for Healthcare Executive-Supplier Interactions
- Creating an Ethical Environment for Employees
- Decisions Near the End of Life
- Ethical Decision Making for Healthcare Executives
- Ethical Issues Related to a Reduction in Force
- Ethical Issues Related to Staff Shortages
- Health Information Confidentiality

- Impaired Healthcare Executives
- Promise-Making, Keeping and Rescinding

ACHE's Ethics Self-Assessment is designed to help healthcare executives identify those areas in which they are on strong ethical ground; areas in which they may wish to examine the basis for their responses; and opportunities for further reflection. It does not have a scoring mechanism, as ACHE does not believe that ethical behavior can or should be quantified.

By setting the tone that ethics is a key component to quality healthcare, healthcare leaders send a clear message that ethical performance is valued more than individual and organizational self-interest

and achievement. Furthermore, by putting systems and resources in place to support ethical decision making, healthcare leaders demonstrate and empower others to act accordingly. ▲

Note: ACHE's next ethics program, funded in part by the Fund for Innovation in Healthcare Leadership, will take place Aug. 5, 2009, at the New York Cluster. Visit ache.org seminars for more information. To learn more about the Fund, please turn to page 26, visit ache.org/innovation, or contact Laura Wilkinson, assistant director, Development, at (312) 424-9305.

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