

Resources for Leaders Conducting Ethical Discussions

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Ethical Leadership: Navigating Workplace Dilemmas for University Supervisors

Leading with integrity requires more than just following policies—it demands thoughtful consideration of complex situations where the right answer isn't always obvious. This guide explores common ethical dilemmas that university supervisors face and provides frameworks for making decisions that align with our institutional values and public mission.

Why Talk About Ethics?



Ethics conversations serve as the foundation of a healthy organizational culture. When we openly discuss ethical considerations, we create pathways for better decision-making and demonstrate our commitment to integrity.

Building Trust

Regular discussions about ethics demonstrate to your team that integrity matters. When employees see supervisors taking ethics seriously, they develop greater trust in leadership and the institution. This trust creates psychological safety where team members feel comfortable raising concerns before they become problems.

Fulfilling Our Public Mission

As a public institution, we have special responsibilities to taxpayers, students, and the broader community. Ethical leadership reinforces our commitment to stewarding resources wisely and maintaining the public's confidence in our operations and decision-making.

Preventing Issues

Proactive ethics discussions help identify potential problems before they escalate into serious violations. By creating space for employees to ask questions about gray areas, supervisors can provide guidance that prevents unintentional missteps.

Encouraging Open Dialogue

When ethics becomes a regular part of workplace conversations, employees develop a shared vocabulary around values and principles. This common foundation makes difficult conversations easier when ethical challenges arise.

Conflict of Interest: Vendor Gifts

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A vendor who frequently supplies equipment to your department has offered your administrative assistant two premium tickets to an upcoming Astros playoff game. The tickets are valued at approximately \$250 each. The vendor mentions they "just want to show appreciation for the smooth processing of their invoices."

Key Questions to Consider

- Is accepting these tickets appropriate given the ongoing business relationship?
- How might this appear to other vendors who compete for university contracts?
- Could this gift influence future purchasing decisions, even subtly?
- What documentation or disclosure would be required in this situation?

Relevant Policy Guidance

- Gifts valued at \$50 or more are prohibited
- Gifts that could appear to influence business decisions should be politely declined
- Consider whether accepting creates an obligation or expectation of reciprocity
- Document all vendor interactions where gifts are offered, even if declined

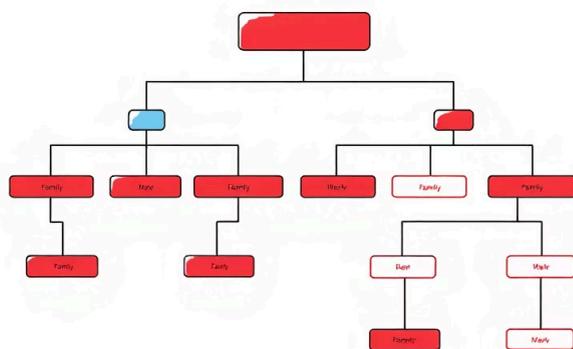


⊗ Beyond Policy: The Perception Test

Even when a gift falls within technical policy limits, consider how it would look if reported in the campus newspaper or discussed in a public meeting. Perception matters in maintaining institutional integrity.

Supervisors should use this scenario to discuss both the letter and spirit of gift policies with their teams, emphasizing that even well-intentioned gifts can create problematic perceptions.

Nepotism or Fair Hiring?



⚠ Supervising relatives creates inherent conflicts that can damage team morale, even when intentions are good. The perception of favoritism can be as damaging as actual favoritism.

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Dr. Martinez, a department chair, wants to hire her niece as a student worker in the department office. The position would require the niece to occasionally assist with projects that Dr. Martinez oversees, though direct supervision would be handled by the office manager.

The Ethical Challenge

Family relationships in the workplace create potential conflicts of interest, especially when one family member has authority over resources, evaluations, or advancement opportunities that could benefit the other. Even with the best intentions, these situations can create both real and perceived fairness issues.

Key Considerations

- Has the position been properly advertised to all eligible students?
- Will Dr. Martinez remove herself entirely from the hiring decision?
- How will performance issues be handled if they arise?
- Has the relationship been disclosed to Human Resources and the dean?
- Are other employees aware of the relationship to maintain transparency?

Policy Guidance

We encourage you to disclose all family relationships in hiring situations. Family members should not participate in hiring decisions or directly supervise relatives. Some departments may have stricter policies that prohibit hiring relatives within the same unit, regardless of reporting structure.

Handling Confidential Information



⊗ Remember:

Having access to information doesn't automatically grant permission to share it, even with other university employees. Protected information should be kept confidential and only shared on a strict "need-to-know" basis.

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After a difficult performance meeting with an employee, University Treasurer Sam Johnson mentions specific details from the employee's personnel file to a colleague over lunch, including information about previous performance issues and accommodations for a medical condition. He justifies sharing this information as "getting a second opinion" on how to handle the situation.

Guidance - Types of Protected Information

Information Type	Protection Requirements
Medical/Disability	Strictly confidential under ADA and HIPAA; must be maintained in separate files with severely restricted access
Performance Evaluations	Limited to direct supervisory chain and HR; specific contents should not be discussed outside this circle
Compensation Data	Access limited to those with business need; sharing individual salary details is inappropriate
Personal Information	Address, phone, family details should not be shared without explicit permission

Ethical Approaches to Sensitive Information

- **Seek guidance without specifics** - Discuss situations hypothetically without identifying individuals
- **Use proper channels** - Consult HR professionals who are trained in confidentiality
- **Document appropriately** - Keep sensitive information in approved, secure systems
- **Consider consent** - When appropriate, ask permission before discussing someone's situation
- **Be transparent about sharing** - Inform employees about who will have access to their information

Social Media and Public Perception

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An employee in your department posts frequently on Instagram about her frustrations with staff and faculty members, sometimes using thinly veiled references that make individuals identifiable. Recently, she posted a series of stories mocking a professor's lecture style and complaining about department policies, using the university's name and hashtags.

The Blurring of Personal and Professional

Social media has fundamentally changed how the personal and professional intersect. University employees' online presence can impact institutional reputation, workplace relationships, and the educational environment—even when posting from personal accounts outside of work hours.

Free Speech vs. Professional Conduct

While university employees retain broad free speech rights, these rights exist alongside professional responsibilities. Content that substantially disrupts the workplace, breaches confidentiality, constitutes harassment, or severely undermines professional relationships may warrant intervention despite free speech protections.

Digital Permanence

Social media content can be screenshotted, shared, and preserved even after deletion. Employees should be reminded that digital communications often reach unintended audiences and create permanent records that can impact professional reputations for years.



Supervisor Discussion Points

- How do you distinguish between protected personal expression and conduct that affects the workplace?
- What approaches can supervisors take when problematic social media use is reported?
- How should concerns about online behavior be documented?
- When is it appropriate to involve Human Resources or Legal Affairs?



Guidance

While the university respects employees' free speech rights, all employees should maintain professionalism in public communications. Using social media to harass colleagues, reveal confidential information, or substantially disrupt university operations may violate university policies and employment expectations.

When Mistakes Happen: Creating a Culture of Accountability

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A program coordinator discovers she has accidentally charged \$12,000 of program expenses to the wrong grant account for the past three months. Correcting this would require significant paperwork and might reveal compliance issues. She asks her supervisor if they can just "leave it as is" since both grants support similar work.

Guidance

Acknowledge the Error Promptly

The longer a mistake goes unaddressed, the more complicated the resolution typically becomes. Supervisors should create psychological safety that encourages immediate reporting of errors rather than hiding them.

Focus on Correction, Not Just Blame

While individual accountability matters, equally important is identifying and fixing the underlying process that allowed the error to occur. Systemic improvements prevent recurrence even as personnel change.

Document Transparently

Proper documentation of both the error and the corrective action protects the institution and demonstrates good faith compliance efforts. Attempting to hide mistakes often violates policy and can transform an error into misconduct.

Learn and Adapt

Use mistakes as learning opportunities for the entire team. Discussing what went wrong and how it was addressed helps others avoid similar errors and builds a culture where improvement is valued.



The Ethical Imperative of Accountability

As stewards of public resources and institutional trust, university supervisors have special responsibilities when mistakes occur. How we respond to errors—whether financial, operational, or interpersonal—reflects our commitment to integrity and models expected behavior for our teams.

"The true test of leadership integrity isn't avoiding all mistakes—it's responding to them with transparency, responsibility, and a commitment to improvement."

✔ Remember:

Most university policies distinguish between honest mistakes and intentional misconduct. The response to a self-reported error will typically be far more favorable than the consequences of discovered concealment.

Ethical Discussion Starters

Ten questions to spark meaningful ethics conversations during team meetings

- **Defining "Right"**

What does "doing the right thing" mean in our department—and where is the line blurry?

- **Speaking Up**

When have you seen someone voice a concern? What made it effective or not?

- **Compassion vs. Fairness**

How do we balance empathy with equity when managing people or enforcing policies?

- **Daily Integrity**

What small behaviors signal integrity in our everyday work interactions?

- **Rules and Lines**

When does bending a rule become crossing the line—and who decides where that boundary is?

- **Policy Violations**

How should we respond when a teammate violates expectations?

- **Power Dynamics**

How does hierarchy affect willingness to report ethical concerns?

- **Admitting Mistakes**

What makes asking for help or acknowledging errors difficult?

- **Maintaining Equity**

How do we avoid favoritism in our decision-making processes?

- **When Rules Fall Short**

What values guide us when policies don't provide clear answers?

Facilitating Ethics Conversations

Practical guidance for creating safe, productive ethical discussions with your team



Create Safety

Establish a judgment-free space where team members feel comfortable sharing honest perspectives



Allow Time

Don't rush—a single question can generate 10-15 minutes of rich dialogue



Stay Neutral

Guide the conversation without steering it toward predetermined conclusions



Ask Follow-Ups

"Why do you think that?" or "Can you give an example?" deepen discussion



Include Everyone

Actively invite quieter voices to contribute their valuable perspectives



Welcome Disagreement

Ethical dilemmas rarely have perfect answers—different views enrich understanding

Keep It Grounded

Avoid abstract legal hypotheticals—focus on real day-to-day workplace scenarios your team actually encounters

Close with Action

End by asking: "What will we do differently going forward?" to translate discussion into practice