December 21, 2015 By: Karla Taylor
As tempting as it is to think, “It can’t happen here,” research shows that unethical conduct is all too common everywhere. Here are practical steps for setting up an ethics program to keep your association’s staff in the right and out of the headlines.
What do 20 years of surveys about bad behavior tell us? “Misconduct happens in every organization,” says Patricia Harned, chief executive officer of the Ethics and Compliance Initiative (ECI). “No organization is free from ethics and compliance challenges.”

The misconduct she’s talking about covers a range of offenses by both employees and organizations. It includes behavior that creates a hostile work environment; conflicts of interest; violations of company internet policies; falsifying time reports; lying to employees, customers, vendors, and the public; theft; and egregious types of corruption, such as bribery, illegal political gifts, and accepting inappropriate gifts.

60% Percentage of workplace misconduct that involved someone with managerial authority, according to the 2013 National Business Ethics Survey of the U.S. Workforce. Roughly 25 percent of observed misconduct involved senior managers.

Harned bases her assertion on the National Business Ethics Survey of the U.S. Workforce, which ECI has conducted eight times since 1994. The survey makes it clear that encouraging appropriate workplace ethics is the job of every organization that wants to maintain a reputable brand—including associations.

Fortunately, there are practical steps you can take to make it more likely that your staff will behave in ways that reflect well on your association. Failing that, these steps make it more likely that you can detect misbehavior and take corrective action sooner.

What the Survey Says

The 2013 National Business Ethics Survey, the most recent edition of the research, was conducted primarily among employees in the for-profit sector, but the findings are consistent with other studies of workplace ethics in government and nonprofits, Harned says. Among the highlights of the ECI survey:

- Just over 40 percent of workers said they had observed on-the-job misconduct that violated their employers’ standards or rules.
- Of those who witnessed misconduct, 63 percent reported what they saw.
- Of those who reported misconduct, 21 percent said they experienced some form of retaliation.
- Sixty percent of misconduct involved someone with managerial authority—as the survey report notes, “the very people who are supposed to set a good example
Why are high-level employees more likely to behave unethically? Harned offers several possible explanations: They may have more opportunities to overstep the rules. They may be under more pressure to show results. And knowing how hard it is to achieve their organizations’ ends, they may be more willing to explain away questionable means.

“It’s easy for managers to think, ‘Misconduct wouldn’t happen here,’” Harned says. But as the survey report notes, “it is hard to expect employees to do the right thing when they often see managers break the rules.”

The good news from the 2013 National Business Ethics Survey: The incidence of workplace misconduct hit a historic low with this report, after trending downward for at least five years. The survey concludes that these positive signs imply that an organizational focus on an ethical culture, combined with ethics and compliance programs, can and does help reduce misconduct.

Developing an Ethics Program

To persuade employees to take upright behavior seriously, “you have to make ethics relevant,” says Terrence Canela, SPHR, CAE, deputy general counsel of the American Institute of Architects and former chair of ASAE’s Ethics Committee. “You have to convince people that ethics actually makes them better at what they’re doing and adds to the integrity of their own personal brand.”

How can you do that? Here are some essential components of a workplace ethics program you can set up within your association.

Start by recognizing that there’s no such thing as a one-size-fits-all ethics program. “Hiring a consultant to come in with a PowerPoint of unenforceable rules won’t fix anything,” Canela says. Your program can only be effective if you tailor it to your organization’s own goals and your workplace culture.

Promote involvement and buy-in from the start. You can only understand your organization’s goals and culture if you “talk to everybody, not just senior staff,” Canela says. “Senior staff are important, but they often only talk to each other, not to the rank and file.”

To direct the effort to set up a program, recruit someone who will act as facilitator, not dictator. Create cross-functional focus groups. Encourage an environment in which people at all levels can speak frankly. Convince people that high ethical standards make them better at what they do.

Research the program elements your workplace needs. A major one is a code to live and work by. Generally, there are two types, Canela says:
Enforceable rules of conduct that, if violated, carry consequences. Typically, these rules are drafted narrowly, like regulations, to deter a particular kind of behavior or activity.

A set of values or principles, usually stated in positive terms, that employees should aspire to live by.

Which type of code should your association develop? The answer is complicated and depends on what you’re trying to accomplish. The staff focus groups will help with your decision making. So will studying ECI’s detailed advice on how to create a code that both meets your needs and is user-friendly for your staff.

Other elements of your program may include

- an ethics and compliance officer
- policies and procedures around key issues your employees face
- a means for employees to report concerns about suspected ethical violations.

What if your association is too small for a complicated code of conduct, much less an anonymous helpline?

The 22-person ECI staff maintains a viable program with just a part-time ethics officer. He’s a mid-level manager and researcher who volunteered to add the position to his other duties. Available to staff on an as-needed basis, he conducts annual training based on ECI’s ethics code.

“If you have a small organization, your ethics officer doesn’t have to be a lawyer or have ethics as a full-time job responsibility,” Harned says. “The person just needs to be ethical, thoughtful, and approachable.”

ASAE’s Standards of Conduct: This document [PDF] spells out aspirational concepts as well as standards for association professionals, consultants, and industry partners.

The Ethics and Compliance Toolkit: This free, practical resource from the Ethics and Compliance Initiative helps with everything from writing a code of conduct to making ethical decisions.


Integrate ethics into your culture. Provide ongoing training. Emphasize learning to think about the ethical aspects of daily work life. Use case studies grounded in your own workplace so people won’t automatically think, “That could never happen to me.” For example, ask how your ethical code applies to everything from staffers’ long lunches to your association’s work in countries where bribes are part of business as usual. Blend
the tendency to wax philosophical with the need to make nitty-gritty choices. “That’s what keeps ethics fresh and alive,” Canela says.

If you create an ethics committee, don’t allow a rubber-stamp approach to decisions about what’s right or wrong. In addition, work to prevent one demographic group from dominating the committee’s makeup, and use term limits to keep members from staying on for years on end.

Finally, ensure that the CEO makes ethics a priority. CEOs set the tone when they routinely talk about doing the right thing with staff, members, and the board. But their actions speak loudest when they model ethical behavior. Whether facing minor quandaries or major problems, they can constantly raise the question, “What do our organizational values tell us about how to handle these decisions?”

As Harned says, “That makes ethics very real—and making ethics tangible makes all the difference in the world to your association and your staff.”

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