

# Ethical Decision Making Tools for Enhancing Organizational Safety Culture

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# Learning Objectives

- **Define “ethics” in relation to various safety professions**
- **Summarize the key elements listed in various safety codes of ethics**
- **Identify three common ethical dilemmas encountered by safety professionals**
- **Explain the link between ethics and “safety culture”**
- **Provide examples of ethical decision making tools that can be used to help address issues**

# “Ethics” defined

- “a set of moral principles or values”
- “the principles of conduct governing an individual or group”
- “conforming to accepted professional standards of conduct”

***“If the situation involves risk,  
then it involves ethics.”***

- Dr. Lawrence Whitehead, UT SPH



# BCSP Code of Ethics

## Word cloud



# AAHP Standards of Professional Responsibility Word Cloud



# What Does it Mean to be a “Professional”?

- Trustworthy, knowledgeable, and insightful
- Altruistic, accountable, have a sense of duty and strive for excellence
- Make ethical choices...commit to personal and professional values
- Intellectual...accept large individual responsibility ... altruistic in motivation
- Maintain high reliability under varying levels of degrading factors
- Dedicate one's skills to the well-being of others

# The Expectations of Professionals

- A professional is expected to adhere to socially acceptable ***standards*** and ***norms*** of practice, in exchange for the **power** that society confers on him/her



# Unequal Power

- One party possesses specialized knowledge and is in a unique position to advise, treat, or have influence over the other party
- Vulnerable party trusts the influential party will work in his/her best interest



- Sources: Physicians for Human Rights 2011 and Kipnis 2011
  - Image: GetBetterHealth.com

# Special Relationships

- Society places exceptional deference and respect on these relationships
- Receive special recognition, treatment, and protection under the law
- Called “special trust”

# Special Relationships

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Attorney -  
Client

Special  
Trust

Doctor- Patient



Priest -  
Penitent



Image: NYTimes.com





**How can I  
keep costs  
down for the  
hospital?**

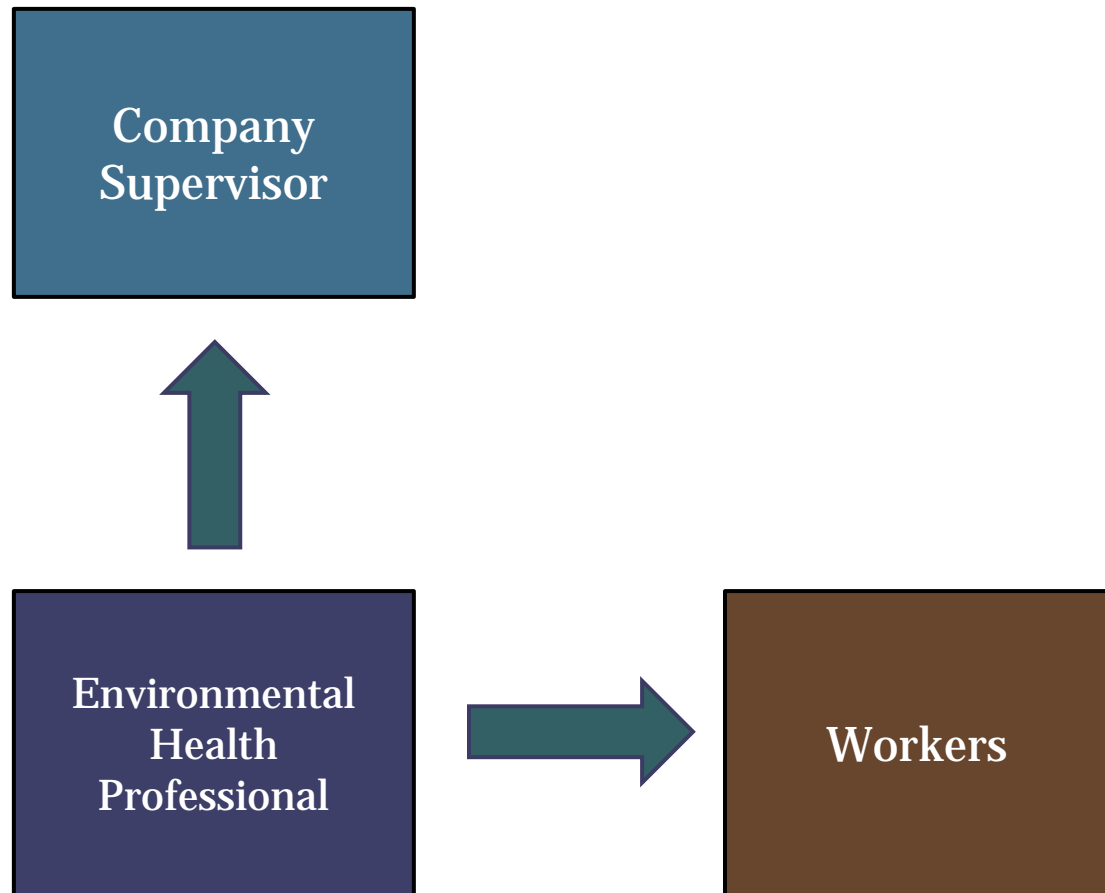
**I wonder if I qualify  
for the  
manufacturer's  
rebate by using this  
new device?**



**Where's my  
Junior  
Mint?**

Image: NYTimes.com

# Example of Possible Conflict of Interest: "Dual Loyalty"



# Dual Loyalty Defined

**The presence of simultaneous obligations between two or more groups, such as workers and management.**

- **What happens if these simultaneous obligations are incompatible?**
- **What happens when the safety person feels some degree of pressure, either real or perceived?**

# Dual Loyalty in Sports Medicine:

## *The Team Doctor*

**Typically a physician (or physician group) is hired by a sports franchise to provide medical care to its athletes.**

**Think about the goals of the franchise...**



# The American Medical Association *Code of Ethics*

## **Principle 4:**

**Respect the rights of patients...[and]  
safeguard confidences and privacy**

## **Principle 8:**

**Regard responsibility to the patient as  
paramount**

# But in Reality, Team Physicians are Pressured, Hard

While head coach for the Jacksonville Jaguars Tom Coughlin candidly admitted that he “can and will exert as much pressure on the player and the doctors to get the player on the field.”



Coach Tom Coughlin

Source: Calandrillo. St. Louis L.J. 185. Fall 2005  
Photo: Wikipedia, Acc 6/26/2013

# Confidentiality

*Consider this actual case:*

- Small group of interventional cardiologists are aggressively monitored given their workload (whole body, extremity, eye)
- Recent discussions about possible lowering of the dose limit for the lens of the eye leads one employee to ask: “who among us gets the highest doses”, knowing the answer is linked to workload and technique
- How should the HP respond?

# “Principled Dissent”

- **Workers voicing concerns about a particular condition**
- **Key points:**
  - **Are concerns actually being voiced?**
  - **How are concerns being voiced?**
  - **How does the organization respond?**
- **What about situations where the safety professional has to be the “principled dissenter”?**
- **Again – does an environment of trust exist?**

# Barriers to Trust

- **Disagreement amongst experts**
- **Lack of communication, coordination amongst risk management organizations**
- **Inadequate risk communication skills, actions**
- **Lack of exposed person participation**
- **Apparent mismanagement or neglect**
- **History of distortion, secrecy**

# Functioning Without Trust

- **Applying a lesson from business**
- **In contract negotiations, accountability, not trust, is the dominant value**
- **Accept the obligation to prove contentions to critics, using methods such as third party sampling, analysis, oversight, or audits**
- **By relying more on accountability and less on trust, safety programs can become more trustworthy**

# What Does Ethics Have to Do With "Safety Culture"?

Safety Culture defined:

- “the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions shared by natural groups as defining norms and values which determine how they act and react in relation to risk and risk control systems” (Hale 2000)
- “Culture” (a noun) is linked inextricably to “behavior” (a verb). Culture can’t be directly measured, but behavior can. Behavior, good or poor, can be an indicator of culture
  - “Safety Climate” a snapshot indication of overall “Safety Culture”
- In short: safety culture is how people behave when no one is looking

# Why This Emphasis on Safety Culture?

- Consider this paradox: Addressing the most frequent workplace injuries experienced by an airline – namely injuries to baggage handlers – in no way provides assurance that a plane crash will not occur
- Such assurance is achieved only when everyone in the organization is attentive to safety at each step of the process – particularly in highly complex risk settings

See: Prof. Andrew Hopkins remarks in US CSB video “Anatomy of a Disaster”





Catastrophic Event





# Ethics and Safety Culture are Linked

- The existence of a safety program, while important, does not ensure a viable safety culture
- A true culture of safety requires commitment across the organization – with a particular emphasis on the front line supervisor as they are primarily responsible and accountable for the safe conduct of workers and operations
  - But are the front line workers equipped with the tools to make ethical decisions regarding safety?
- Important for safety to function as a role model and in a service capacity, perceived as providing a collegial and valuable service to the organization



# Example: Welding Job

- Safety's focus
  - Hot works permit, portable fire extinguisher, fire watch
  - Protective equipment for eyes, lungs, skin
  - Curtains, barriers
  - Confined space, elevated work surface
  - Monitoring for exposures
- But was the weld done correctly? How do we know?
  - Welder proficiency, professionalism
  - Knowledgeable supervisor who verifies work
  - Worker empowered to voice concerns
  - Management commitment/support

# Perhaps it is a Labeling Problem?

- Perhaps the term “safety” in “culture of safety” is a barrier for upper management
  - See “Words That Works” Luntz, F.
- We say “safety...”, leaders may think “safety department”
- Could we communicate more clearly by using a different term:
  - “Culture of professionalism”?
  - “Culture of integrity”?

# Decision-Making Tools

- **Codes of Ethics**
- **Textbooks**
- **Journal articles**
- **Online sources** – webinars, blogs, Listservs, LinkedIn Groups
- **Seminars**

# The Simplest Tool Ever

- **What is the best course of action for this worker or group of workers?**
  - Assume you like the worker(s)
  - Identify available resources – knowledge, skills, facilities, equipment (yours and those of your team)
- **What is my motivation for recommending a course of action?**
  - Rewards of providing good advice
  - Intellectual stimulation
  - Financial rewards – including keeping your job



# Summary

- **Instilling a true culture of safety is a long term process requiring commitment and involvement at all levels of the organization**
- **The issue of ethical decision making that leads to a culture of safety goes far beyond the traditional boundaries of typical safety programs**
- **As a profession, we should seize the leadership role in providing education about the need for ethical decision making at all levels to instill a true culture of safety**
- **It is our professional obligation to do so!**

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