

Why ethics training?

Ethics training is insulting. I would never take a bribe or rig bids or cheat on my time. Weren't we supposed to learn this stuff in kindergarten?

Have you heard other employees say similar things? Have you thought them yourself? It is true that we are supposed to learn right from wrong before joining the workforce. But ethics training is not about teaching employees what it means to be a good person. What, then, is it about?

Posting the Speed Limit. Just because we learned right from wrong as children, that does not mean that as adults we automatically know the speed limit everywhere we drive. We still need speed limit signs. Similarly, the fact that an employee is a good person does not mean she intuitively knows the laws that apply to her work. She needs and deserves to hear what those laws are. It's a matter of fairness: just as it would be unfair for a town to reduce a speed limit from 45 to 15 m.p.h. without posting a sign, so it would be unfair not to let employees know the ethical standards to which they will be held.

Making the Law Come Alive. The text of the Ethics Act sets forth our obligations. But it may seem at times to be overly abstract and confusing. It is written in "legalese" and interpreted by lawyers. Furthermore, simply reading the Ethics Act won't turn an unethical employee into an ethical employee any more than reading an exercise book would turn a couch potato into an athlete. Without effective ethics training, the Ethics Act is a piece of paper--nothing more.

Good ethics training brings life to the paper document that is the Ethics Act. It cuts through the legalese and shows employees how to live those standards in real, concrete workplace situations. By offering examples and case studies, good ethics training helps employees internalize and live the goal of the Ethics Act, which is to improve the ethical climate in the State of Illinois.

Showing That the State of Illinois Means What It Says. Knowledge of ethics rules is meaningless unless employees *believe* that the State really wants them to follow these rules. The pressure in the workplace to conform to a boss's or coworkers' expectations can lead to a certain cynicism about the seemingly abstract messages contained in the Ethics Act.

The Ethics Act tells employees what they should do in challenging situations. Questionable practices often persist as a matter of habit, not a conscious intention to break the rules. In such environments, new employees--and even not-so-new employees--tend to wonder

whether the State tacitly approves of “the way things are done.” Ethics training makes it clear that the resounding answer is, “No,” and gives employees a reason to insist on more appropriate conduct.

Effective ethics training helps reinforce the message that the State does not approve of ethics violations in any workplace. It allows the ethics commissions, ethics officers and inspectors general to show that they are serious about enforcing the Ethics Act. Such training is thus a critical element in creating and maintaining an ethical culture.

Employees who learn of activity that makes them uncomfortable are often relieved to find, through training, that what is happening in their area *is* unacceptable—they're not crazy after all! Such persons frequently find the courage, after training, to report what is going on, and to help fix the problem before it grows too large.

Informing Employees About Their Resources. Employees who face an ethics-related crisis often feel isolated, with nowhere to turn. A sense of isolation, in fact, is a primary reason why employees don't speak up at all. It is thus of vital importance that, during ethics training, employees learn that they are not alone. Whether employees turn to an ethics commission, an ethics officer, an executive inspector general, or elsewhere, the important thing is that they know that they can and should tell *someone*. If employees come out of ethics training with an understanding that help is available, half the battle is won.

We're all in this together. Regardless of our individual jobs, State employees have the common desire to do the right thing. Ethics training turns like-minded State employees into a community of common intent dedicated to serving the public good rather than private interests. It gives employees the knowledge to go about their jobs in the right way and the support to do so, even when it involves making difficult choices.

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For more information, see the Executive Ethics Commission's web site, www.eec.illinois.gov or contact your agency's Ethics Officer.