Ethics

March is National Ethics Awareness Month
Make Ethics Your Personal Cause

As we celebrate the 85th anniversary of the ICMA Code of Ethics this year, ICMA members can take pride in our personal commitment to ethical conduct and public service values. But are we equally proud of the ethical climate in the organizations in which we carry out our everyday work? Have we demonstrated real leadership in promoting ethical behaviors and practices in our organizations?

With March designated as National Ethics Awareness month, there is no better time to either craft a thoughtful strategy for strengthening the ethical culture of the organization you lead or assess whether your efforts to date are working. Consider these factors that are critical to building an ethical culture:

1. The standard is set at the top: you can't lead from the rear on this issue.

In the mundane everyday activities as well as in the challenging moments, you set the ethical standard or tone. If you want to inspire your staff to the highest standard of conduct, you must model the conduct you want to see in others. And when errors or missteps happen, you must demonstrate true accountability by taking personal responsibility and correcting the deficiencies.

2. Define your core values and the behaviors that support those values.

ICMA members can look to the ICMA Code of Ethics for values-based guidance on the right course of action. Staff members who belong to other professional associations with a code of ethics get similar assistance. But employees who are not members of a professional association with a code of ethics are left without any guidance if their place of employment fails to define its core values and the behaviors that support those values.

Work to develop organizational values that will reduce ambiguity and provide individuals with some essential guidance on what's expected and what's right. As you develop your group's values, use a process that engages elected officials and staff to achieve greater commitment to the values. If your organization already has a code of ethics, is it still viable and does it influence conduct? Is there still clarity and agreement on the core values that drive critical decisions? Remember that organizations or teams with shared values produce the best results.

3. Assess the organization's culture: wouldn't some baseline information about attitudes and behaviors in the organization be helpful in crafting your strategy?

Does your culture expect staff to report questionable ethical behavior of others? Are staff members clear about where to go for advice about ethical issues? Assess your own conduct: do you think that members of your staff would say that you show appreciation when they bring forward bad news, or do you "shoot the messenger" if they do so? These questions are part of a

short but useful assessment tool developed by ICMA and the California Institute for Local Government.

4. Select the right who.

Recruit the most talented, ethical employees and link good conduct with incentive structures. Warren Buffett once noted, "In looking for people to hire, look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if they don't have the first, the other two will kill you." Celebrate exemplary conduct, whether it's the ordinary everyday ethical conduct or the single courageous act.

5. Challenge bad behavior.

It's an old but true adage that what we allow, we approve. Don't walk by something that is wrong.

6. Commit to ethics training.

Regular training builds awareness of common ethical issues, provides tools and strategies for effective problem solving, and, yes, can even inspire people to do the right thing when they are faced with a difficult ethical dilemma. Remember that it is a myth that good people always make wise choices.

7. Inoculate against the "e-virus" by providing advice, counseling, and whistle-blowing.

Make sure that staff members have informal and formal opportunities to raise any ethical concerns they may have about conduct or decisions in the organization. Create a safe and responsive environment outside the chain of command for those seeking advice or reporting an issue. Effectively providing for advice and counseling may actually decrease the need for someone to blow the whistle by giving leadership advance warning and the opportunity to address ethically troubling activities.

8. Promote your values.

Publicly and consistently communicate the values that guide you and the organization in your exchanges with the public, media, business, and other stakeholders. It is not about making a cavalier statement that your organization is better than others. It is demonstrating that you do have standards and are willing to be held accountable to them.

As leaders, let's revisit the sage advice of Peter Drucker: "The proof of the sincerity and seriousness of a management is uncompromising emphasis on integrity of character. . . . For it is character through which leadership is exercised; it is character that sets the example and is imitated . . . the spirit of an organization is created from the top. If an organization is great in spirit, it is because the spirit of its top people is great. If it decays, it does so because the top rots."