

# *The Ethics Officer*

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## *Introduction*

The overall goal of the Ethics Officer (EO) is to provide leadership in and, develop and manage resources for, promoting ethical behaviour and decision-making. The mission, vision, and values of an organization ought to be measured against these. While the EO serves multiple stakeholders (employees, employers, customers, clients, etc.) they do not advocate for any particular stakeholder, but rather serves as an advocate for fair decision-making processes and the creation of a thriving moral community.

The EO has the responsibility of overseeing all aspects of an organization's operations to ensure that they are consistent with the organization's moral values.

## *What an Ethics Officer ought not be*

There are some groups that combine ethics with the law. There are others that combine it with compliance. Even worse, there are those who combine it with risk management. These are fundamentally mistaken.

The reasons for this lie in the definitions of each of the terms.

**ETHICS** is about fundamental values. About doing the right thing because it is the right thing.

**THE LAW** is about the consequences of transgressing societal norms. Once spelt out this way it is easy to see that people will (mostly) obey the law if the consequences are dire enough regardless of whether they think the law is moral. There have been plenty of immoral laws.

**COMPLIANCE** is about getting obedience. Equally, (mostly) people take umbrage at attempts to pressure them to behave.

**RISK** is about getting the probability that an event will occur combined with the severity/seriousness of the consequences from the event.

Finally the EO must not be either part-time or consultant/contractor. If part-time this tell the workers that ethics is not taken seriously

enough. If a consultant/contractor then they may give the appearance of independence from the powerful but not from the paymaster.

*Some things an Ethics Officer ought to take care of:*

IT OUGHT TO BE EMPHASIZED THAT IT IS NOT POSSIBLE FOR A SINGLE INDIVIDUAL TO ADEQUATELY TAKE ON ALL OF THESE ROLES SIMULTANEOUSLY.

- **[Strategic]**  
Develop, implement, lead, and coordinate an organization-wide ethical approach (an infrastructure or culture if you will) to carrying out the mandate of the organization. EO's need to ensure that the organization's policies are consistent with ethical standards. Embed effective ethical consideration into all decisions at all levels of the organization.
- **[Structural]**  
Lead and advise the Ethics Committee. Evaluate prospective committee members.
- **[Understanding]**  
Articulate the moral basis for the organization's ethos and mission statement.
- **[Analytics]**  
Assist the troubled with "unpacking" moral issues in a way that makes sense[ to the troubled]. Provide advice and consultation concerning anything anyone considers an ethics matter. Be a resource to assist all in the organization with the process of making considered and informed ethical decisions.
- **[Discussions]**  
Make it clear to **all** that informal conversations regarding ethical issues are important aspects of addressing ethics difficulties. This means being open to impromptu opportunities to clarify ethics opacity of anyone in the organization. This means ensuring that whomever an ethics issue is discussed with they know the nature and extent of those who ought to be involved. The EO may need to have philosophical counselling experience.
- **[Education]**  
Some call this ethics training but that is a too limited description. It is incumbent of the EO to ensure adequate moral literacy of all in the organization. This education can take many forms from

arranging ethics talks, to round-tables, seminars, and workshops. To know what the appropriate educational needs are the EO needs to assess the level of moral literacy (this might be called an ethics skills assessment) of each member of the organization.

- **[Reporting]**

It seems that inevitably someone will feel that something unethical has happened. It is the EO's responsibility to initiate confidential process for the handling of these events. That is, to investigate and report on allegations of misconduct.

- **[Repair]**

Once things have gone wrong in the organization it is the EO's responsibility that a moral repair process is initiated. So they, must manage and review all moral repair processes.

### *Key Organizational Criteria*

- **[Empowerment]**

Give the EO sufficient power to ensure that their efforts cannot be frustrated by others. Make them reportable to the highest level of management there is; all else will result in efforts to get the EO to compromise.

- **[Independence]**

This is closely related to empowerment. EO's must have sufficient authority and independence to oversee the integrity of their ethics initiatives. They should never be combined with compliance or legal departments.

- **[Connections]**

This is often called having a seat-at-the-table, being present at meetings when important ethos, strategy, mission, and operational constraints are decided. That is, they must have formal connections with all branches of the organization.

- **[Access]**

The EO must have access to all the relevant information they need to be able to form independent judgments and to be able to oversee the implementation of ethics initiatives.

- **[Resources]**

Nothing kills efforts to implement ethics programs quicker than not allocating sufficient resources. This has been known to be done deliberately: Look like you care about ethics but don't allow anything to interfere with the production plan.

### *Capabilities*

- **[Communication]**  
Demonstrated high level of written and conversational communication with management, professionals, and other workers. Developing and reinforcing messages of the importance of the priority of the awareness of ethical worth and worthiness.
- **[Project Management]**  
Extensive demonstrated skills and ability to strategically and conceptually plan, coordinate, deliver, and review ethics programs.
- **[Spin doctoring]**  
Demonstrated experience in working with executives.

### *Qualifications*

What qualifications ought the ideal Ethics Officer have?

The EO ought to have —

- **[Formal]**  
Higher education qualifications appropriate for both the industry of the organization and in ethics.
- **[Industry]**  
Sufficient working knowledge of and, experience in, the industry that the organization operates in.
- **[Profession]**  
At least ordinary membership standing in one (if there are several) of the professions that the organization has employees belonging to. Membership in an ethics professional group.