Healthcare leaders continually find themselves in situations in which they are called upon to make the right decision for the well-being of their patients, their staff and their communities. Because ethics is such an important component of the work healthcare leaders do, virtually all healthcare organizations have an ethical code or policy in place. And, as part of membership in ACHE, all members commit to following ACHE's *Code of Ethics*.

Ethical Wisdom

Doing the Right Thing, Every Day, Everywhere in the Organization

By Jessica D. Squazzo

As anyone faced with an ethical dilemma knows, these types of situations are rarely black and white. That is why having a framework by which to address ethical concerns is critical to helping healthcare executives do the right thing every day. And, equally important, healthcare leaders must make it a priority to model ethical behavior and instill a culture within their organizations in which unethical behavior is not tolerated.

Jack A. Gilbert, EdD, FACHE, addressed this topic in San Francisco last October at the program "Ethical Wisdom: Doing the Right Thing, Every Day, Everywhere in the Organization." The ACHE program, funded in part by the Fund for Innovation in Healthcare Leadership, was held in conjunction with the San Francisco Cluster.

"What does it take for well-meaning people at well-meaning organizations to do the right thing every day?" Gilbert, director of the Master of Healthcare Innovation program and clinical associate professor in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation at Arizona State University, and author of *Strengthening Ethical Wisdom: Tools for Transforming Your Health Care Organization* (American Hospital Association, 2007), challenged the audience to think about this and more throughout the session.

Ethics and Performance

Gilbert began the seminar by exploring the bond between ethics and organizational performance. He shared examples of how some of history's most successful healthcare companies—including Johnson & Johnson—were so because they were driven more by their vision and *values* than by profit margins. He recalled the Tylenol poison scare in the 1980s.

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"The decision [to recall product from store shelves] was a no-brainer for Johnson & Johnson because they had a credo—and their credo drove the action," Gilbert said.

While organizations may have ethical credos or values statements in place, they often get pushed into the background. "Just because we have a vision, values and a code of ethics, that does not necessarily suggest they are alive in the organization," Gilbert said.

Ethics and values in an organization can become eroded if unethical behavior is allowed to just become "the way we do it." This ethical erosion can be a slippery slope that has dire consequences on organizational performance and even patient safety.

Gilbert defined ethical erosion as a series of small, even unnoticed, acts that chip away at ethical behavior with each act providing a foundation for the next, more erosive act; all of which can lead to significant, even disastrous, adverse organizational and personal consequences.

"These slight deviations [from an ethical code] limit doing the right thing every day," he said.

So how can organizations make sure they are doing the right thing every day? Gilbert advises organizations to

Panelists Share Ethical Insights

During "Ethical Wisdom: Doing the Right Thing, Every Day, Everywhere in the Organization," a panel of healthcare executives described some of the ethical dilemmas they have faced during their careers. Here, the panelists share their insights on the importance of ethical leadership:

"Ethical leadership is about taking a principled stand in the face of an ethical dilemma. The decision is often hard and can occasionally prove to be more time consuming, but demonstrating it just once provides more dividends for organizational culture than scores of lectures and training sessions."

Delvecchio S. Finley, FACHE
Vice President, Operations
California Pacific Medical Center
San Francisco

"It's been said that 'leaders don't always make the right decisions, but they make their decisions right.' The message for me in this saying is that ethical leadership requires exceptional integrity and transparency."

Jerrold A. Maki, FACHE
Vice President, Clinical Services
Stanford (Calif.) Hospital and Clinics

"It is patient first always. If you stay true to that mission, ethical erosion is not a problem."

Carrie Owen Plietz, FACHE
COO
Mills-Peninsula Health Services/Sutter
Health System
Burlingame, Calif.

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harness the *ethical wisdom* within them to ensure they stay on the pathway to maintaining an ethical culture. Ethical wisdom is defined as the individual and collective knowledge, experience and good sense to make sound ethical decisions and judgments everywhere, every day. Not only do organizations already have this wisdom, Gilbert said, but the wisdom to do the right thing could come from anyone at any level of the organization. Maintaining an ethical culture is a group effort.

Five Disciplines for an Ethical Culture

Gilbert provided the audience with five disciplines for an ethical culture, a framework by which healthcare leaders and their organizations can begin to think about ethical behavior:

1. **Mindfulness**: simply being aware that something unethical might be going on. "This is the private voice of ethical wisdom," Gilbert said.

2. **Voice**: the public voice of ethics within an organization. "Are staff encouraged and acknowledged for speaking up, or are they criticized for challenging common practice?" Gilbert asked. "Are there forums in which people, including leaders, can talk about values in your organization?"

3. **Respect**: a basic building block of an ethical culture. "Crucial conversations are impossible to have if people in the conversation don't respect each other," Gilbert said.

4. **Tenacity**: moving beyond thinking in black and white terms about what is right or wrong. Instead, make a

commitment to elevate the conversation to what is best for patients and the community, Gilbert said.

5. **Legacy**: making decisions based on long-term goals (for example, fulfilling the organization's mission and vision) rather than in the expediency of the moment.

Four Disciplines of Ethical Leadership

Healthcare leaders play a crucial role in helping an organization maintain an ethical culture; therefore, according to Gilbert, ethical erosion can in turn erode a leader's effectiveness, including the leader's ability to inspire trust among his or her staff.

"By allowing others in the organization to behave unethically, you as a leader lose your credibility," Gilbert said. Leading by example is imperative when it comes to setting an organization on an ethical path.

Just as there are disciplines that foster an ethical culture, so too are there disciplines that foster ethical leadership. Gilbert offered the following four disciplines of ethical leadership to help leaders set an ethical tone for their organizations. These disciplines are interconnected with the five disciplines of an ethical culture, above.

1. **Noble purpose**: an organization's calling and a leader's ability to inspire that calling within his or her staff. "At the heart of healthcare is a calling to care," Gilbert said. "If we don't speak to and honor that, we [leaders] can create a feeling in our people that it's not important to us."

2. **Ceaseless ambition**: what transforms an organization's noble purpose into committed, bold goals and action.

"Just because we have a vision, values and a code of ethics, that does not necessarily suggest they are alive in the organization."

Jack A. Gilbert, EdD, FACHE
Arizona State University

3. **Candor**: sharing the good, the bad and the ugly. This is the consistent self-awareness organizations must have about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

4. **Passion**: driving change from rational arguments about behavior combined with a passion for healthcare's calling (to serve others). "It's important to communicate," Gilbert said. "It's possible your people don't really know you and your dedication to serving patients and the community."

The above leadership disciplines are all critical to stopping ethical erosion and leveraging ethical wisdom within an organization, said Gilbert—a quest that is never ending for leaders and all staff members.

"There are ways to do the right thing that we don't even know about yet," Gilbert said. "We may not be able to change the circumstances [around us], but we can choose our attitude towards them, believe and let others know that doing the right thing every day is a worthwhile pursuit, and appreciate that even the smallest acts of integrity matter in creating ethical health for the whole organization."

Jessica D. Squazzo is senior writer for Healthcare Executive.

Editor's note: For information on ACHE's many ethics resources, including the *Code of Ethics* and ACHE's Ethics Toolkit, visit **ache.org** and click Ethics on the left-hand side of the page.

The Fund for Innovation in Healthcare Leadership

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An article on the first of two Fund programs for 2010, "The Digital Medicine Revolution in Healthcare," which was held in September at the Atlanta Cluster, appeared in the January/February issue of *Healthcare Executive.*

The Fund was established in 2006 to bring innovation to the forefront of healthcare leadership by developing and enhancing its focus on future healthcare leaders, ethics in healthcare management and healthcare management innovations. In its commitment to developing future leaders, the Fund also has

provided scholarships for ACHE's Senior Executive and Executive Programs. Since the Fund's inception, more than 1,000 generous donors have made contributions. This support has enabled the Fund to strengthen the field of healthcare leadership by providing educational opportunities on important trends and issues.

For more information on the Fund, including ways to contribute, please visit **ache.org/Innovation** or contact R. Barkley Payne, vice president, Development, at (312) 424-9306 or bpayne@ache.org.

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