Resolving Ethical Issues In The Workplace
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Morality and values-based dilemmas in the workplace are, at best, difficult to handle when employees have to choose between what’s right and what’s wrong according to their own principles. Forward-thinking employers who implement workplace ethics policies are usually well-prepared for the potential conflicts of interest that arise due to the diversity of opinion, values and culture in the workforce. However, handling ethical issues in the workplace requires a steady and cautious approach to matters which can potentially be dangerous or illegal.

Step 1
Develop a workplace policy based on your company’s philosophy, mission statement and code of conduct. Incorporate the policy into your performance management program to hold employees accountable for their actions and alert them to their responsibilities to uphold professional standards throughout their job performance and interaction with peers and supervisors. Revise your employee handbook to include the policy and provide copies of the revised handbook to employees. Obtain signed acknowledgement forms from employees that indicate they received and understand the workplace ethics policy.

Step 2
Provide workplace ethics training to employees. Utilize varied instruction methods to engage employees in learning how to address and resolve ethical dilemmas. Experiential learning, or role-play, is an effective way to facilitate workplace ethics training. Examples of workplace ethics simulations involve scenarios about the misappropriation of company funds, personal values related to improper workplace relationships and the organization’s compliance with regulatory controls.

Step 3
Designate an ombudsperson in charge of handling employees’ informal concerns pertaining to workplace ethics. Consider whether your organization also needs an ethics hotline, which is a confidential service employees may contact whenever they encounter workplace dilemmas that put them into uncomfortable or threatening positions. Confidential hotlines are an effective way to assure employees’ anonymity, which is a concern for employees whose alerts are considered “whistleblowing” actions.
Step 4
Research federal, state and municipal labor and employment laws pertaining to whistleblowing. Refrain from making employment decisions, such as termination or suspension, in connection with whistleblowing or an employee’s right to protected activity under whistleblowing laws or public policy. Seek legal advice for employee reports of workplace ethics issues that increase your organization’s liability under federal, state or municipal employment law. Under the Texas Whistleblower Act, for example, public-sector employees may be entitled to damages if an employer engages in retaliatory actions based on an employee who, in good faith, files a complaint related to workplace ethics. The Act grants "[a] public employee who claims that his suspension, termination, or other adverse personnel action was in retaliation for his good faith reporting of violations of the law the right to sue for damages and other relief."

Step 5
Apply your workplace policy consistently when addressing workplace issues and employee concerns about workplace ethics. Use the same business principles in every circumstance, regardless of the perceived seriousness or the level of employees involved. Communicate the same expectations for all employees – whether they are in executive positions or front-line production roles – and approach every issue with equal interpretation of the company policy.