ETHICAL ISSUES AND DILEMMAS IN THE MENTAL HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT: Agency directors, middle managers in large organizations, and managers in general must be concerned with managing ethics as part of personnel management. The authors discuss the ethical dilemmas that face administrators and how such issues can be resolved.

Agency directors, middle managers in large organizations, and managers in general must be concerned with ethics as part of personnel management, often above and beyond existing ethical codes for psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and other mental health professionals. Personnel and human resource activities provided and modeled by managers must be designed to increase the ethical behavior of employees, who, in modeling the managers' ethical sensitivity to the rights of others, become role models for their own clients. It is therefore necessary that administrators develop a personal ethic in order to serve as role models, assure quality of service while maintaining the ethical philosophy of the organization, and manage day-to-day agency or system activities so that ethical behavior is the norm. Beyond these demands, they also have to apply ethical principles when dealing with broad-ranging issues that may not frequently occur in the organization. These varied responsibilities require administrators to make decisions and solve problems while assuring that ethical codes and values are not violated. They also recognize that ethical standards are often designed to describe enforceable principles of conduct, knowing that ethical standards cannot be exhaustive. Simply because specific

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conducts are not addressed in an ethics code does not make them either ethical or unethical (American Psychological Association [APA], 1992).

**DEVELOPING A PERSONAL ETHIC**

Moral and ethical rules of conduct govern our behavior. In the workplace, administrators make decisions and take actions that are the consequence of their own morals, ethics, values, and attitudes. The goal of the mental health care administrator is to become ethically sensitive and to be aware of the rights of the individual and society so that the mental health organization does not cause suffering to others (Barton & Barton, 1984).

Managers enter the mental health care field as professionals who have already developed at least an implicit personal ethic. Building on this framework, a personal ethic about management evolves through introspection and experience. Furthermore, the mental health care administrator can rely on the code of ethics of his or her professional organization and on the organization's philosophy to modify the personal ethic. Even so, a manager's personal ethic develops slowly over time and must be constantly modified and refined, and, since codes of ethics restrict behavior for all individuals in the mental health profession, the manager's personal code of ethics can never be more liberal than that of the professional written code.

For the mental health services manager, a personal ethic is the moral framework that is used to define the appropriate relationship with client, employee, and organization. The manager is the organization's conscience, and his or her decisions and actions, which represent the organization, morally affect many individuals. This underscores the importance of essential elements of the manager's personal ethic which include never using the management position for selfish advantage or personal gain, and never acting in a way that carries the slightest hint of wrongdoing. In order that it apply to the broadest range of ethical issues, the manager's personal ethic should be clear, consistent, and comprehensive.

The organization's philosophy provides a general context for the manager's activities and decision-making. But the presence of an organizational philosophy does not eliminate the manager's need for a personal ethic. The personal ethic provides individual managers with a framework for action, and permits greater refinement of principles, rules, and particular judgments and actions than is likely to be present in the statement of philosophy of the organization.

**ETHICAL MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE**

In the mental health agency or system, quality assurance is largely the responsibility of the administrator, although peer-review committees and local professional organizations can help ensure quality. Essentially, it is up to the