

The Toxic Work Environment: A Question of Ethics

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I've been in the mental health service arena since 1988 and have seen many trends come and go. I've worked in the public and private sectors, for large and small agencies, served on boards and community/state task forces, and held front line positions and senior management positions. Through all those trends and different roles, the Code of Ethics has been a constant and reliable source of grounding.

About 10 years into practice, I realized that I actually encounter few true ethical dilemmas. As I understand ethical dilemmas, social workers are faced with competing values and must choose between the competing values; there is no clear or perfect solution and a social work value gets compromised. Situations that often get identified as an ethical dilemma are really situations where the ethical answer is clear (no competing values to choose between) but implementation is uncomfortable for the social worker. Following through on what is ethically correct is not always popular and can even lead to serious jeopardy for the social worker.

In my experience, many of these uncomfortable ethical situations are inherent in unhealthy work place cultures. Two of the most common unethical situations I've encountered in such cultures are professionals advancing themselves 1) at the expense of others, and/or 2) misrepresenting their accomplishments. These are not ethical dilemmas because there are no competing values to choose between. But such ethical misconduct violates the Code on multiple accounts, i.e., the value of Integrity, Ethical Responsibilities to Colleagues, Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals, and Ethical Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession.

The Code is clear that we are to directly address concerns with colleagues "when feasible and when such discussion is likely to be productive". We are also exhorted to "take action through appropriate formal channels" if necessary. However, colleagues who advance themselves at the expense of others or by misrepresenting their accomplishments do not tend to engage in meaningful or productive dialogue about their misconduct. When the work place culture supports or dismisses their misconduct, it is almost impossible to reasonably resolve the situation. Often there is inadequate concrete evidence to present to more formal channels such as licensure boards or ethics committees. This leaves the social worker in a troubling ethical spot because there is often no effective recourse.

I wish I could close with some breakthrough formula for managing these insidious ethical offenses. Sadly, my experience has been that it becomes my word against their word. An unhealthy or toxic work place culture permits the misconduct to continue. If a social worker is committed to the Code of Ethics, the choices are limited. Typically, the social worker either suffers in silence or moves onto another employment situation in hopes of an ethical fit. I have done the latter on several occasions. But, only after taking my concerns to the highest possible authority in my agency. Notifying senior management of egregious ethical conduct did not change the situation and most of those unethical colleagues are still in place. However, I upheld the Code and my personal integrity...and that is what we are all called to do, even when it is unpleasant and the system we work in is beyond our individual influence.