

Shared Ethics

ADVISORY COMMISSION

BRINGING ETHICS AWARENESS AND TRAINING TO OUR COMMUNITIES

2022 ETHICS SUMMIT

Case Studies

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2022 SEAC Ethics Case Study #1

New Wheels

The City is planning on upgrading some of its car fleet and has asked four local dealerships to submit proposals. The proposals are due next Monday for the initial purchase of three automobiles and the City is hoping that the proposals come in at \$140,000 or less. (Note: Sealed bids are not required below \$150,000.)

Three of the four dealers have already submitted their proposals and Bob, the City Controller, noticed that there was a larger than expected variance between the submitted proposals causing him to wonder if the lowest proposal left something out.

When he had some time, Bob removed the proposals from the locked file cabinet where he was keeping them for security purposes. Just as he began looking over the documents in more detail, the Mayor's assistant called and told Bob that the Mayor needed to see him "right now." Bob left the proposals on his desk and hurried over to the Mayor's office.

In the meantime, a park department employee, Janet, came to Bob's office to deliver drawings for planned park improvements that her boss needed Bob to review. She happened to notice the proposals on Bob's desk and since she is in the market for a new car herself, she wondered which dealership might offer the best deal.

That evening, she mentioned the numbers to her husband Henry whose brother works for the dealer that is the fourth likely bidder, though Henry did not know his brother's firm was preparing a proposal. The next day Henry asked his brother how the proposals could be so different. The brother responded that he could not say "without seeing the bids."

The following day, the brother mentioned the numbers to his boss who was preparing the fourth firm's proposal.

Questions:

- Were mistakes made here?
- Are there ethical violations?
- Has the bidding process been compromised?

SEAC Ethics Case Study #2

In the Driver's Seat

Some on the Town Council object to take-home cars for department heads and supervisors. They brought forth a resolution that town policy should specifically state that these vehicles only be used for town business except for driving between home and the town work locations. The resolution passed and specifies “personal use of town vehicles is hereby strictly limited” without further definition.

The Public Works Director Jacob routinely uses his town provided truck to visit work sites and drives around town as a normal part of his job looking for potential problems. If it is no more than a slight detour, he stops at a local grocery or liquor store to buy products for his family's use. Occasionally, on the way home he stops at the bar about a half mile from the town hall to “chew the fat with the boys.”

His brother is running for the advisory board in a neighboring township. The brother is scheduled to appear at an important “meet the candidate” luncheon, but his car is in the shop. As a favor, Jacob agrees to pick up his brother in his town provided truck and take him to the luncheon which is no more than three miles out of Jacob's way.

Question:

- Do you see any ethical violations?
- Other problems?

SEAC Ethics Case Study #3

Shoulder to Cry On

Estelle Brown has been having personal problems. She asks if her supervisor Michelle will listen to her story and give her advice. Michelle agrees. They have several conversations, including at extended lunch breaks and sometimes during the workday.

After a while, Michelle tires of hearing Estelle's tale of woe and tells her to "toughen up and move on with your life." Despite being tired of talking to Estelle, Michelle thought some of her problems were actually humorous. Both in public places and via email she provided her two best friends in other town departments with a running account of Estelle's ups and downs. The three of them even laughed about Estelle and her problems over cocktails after work.

One day, Estelle received a work-related email that had a long string of previous emails. Deep in the chain was an email from Michelle to her two friends scheduling an afterwork meeting for "drinks and a good laugh about E. B.'s latest life challenges."

Question:

- Are there any ethical issues?
- How could all of this been avoided?

SEAC Ethics Case Study #4

Taking Sides

Town Council meetings have been very contentious for the past several months. Town employees are sometimes pulled into the fray and are asked to take sides.

After one particularly bitter meeting, the Council President reminded a group of employees who seem to be in sympathy with the other faction that the salary ordinance was on next month's Council calendar. He mentioned to one of those employees that it would be a good idea to stay out of Council disputes "unless you want to hurt yourself and all your co-workers."

Offended and mad, this employee goes on social media to express his outrage. As a result, he, some of his co-workers, and others from the community come to the next Council meeting with signs, engage in loud chanting and in general disrupt the meeting. The Council President adjourns the meeting without resolving any of the issues.

The next day, the Council President instructs the Public Works Director to immediately put everyone involved on a two-week suspension without pay. This further enrages the employees who set up a GoFundMe page to raise funds to oppose the Council President in next years election. They distribute flyers about the GoFundMe account at the town garage and in breakrooms at the town hall.

Question:

- Do you see any ethical violations?
- What problems do you see with this "mess"?