MIDWEST SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Volume 22 (2019)   www.iass1.org

Formerly Journal of the Indiana Academy of the Social Sciences

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Citizen Initiative to Improve Local Government Ethics: Northwest Indiana Experience[*]

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ABSTRACT

After more than 50 years of widespread public corruption in Northwest Indiana, a small group of citizens and public officials met over a period of several months and developed a largely voluntary response. The result was the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission, which trains public employees on ethical decision making, provides specialized training for department heads and board and commission members, and hosts an annual ethics summit for the general public. Periodic employee ethics surveys indicate a positive effect of the training. In addition, the commission has developed a Candidate Ethics Action Pledge administered in each local election cycle, and a 12-page checklist for member communities to use to evaluate their own policies. The commission is funded by modest membership dues (for most communities, only a few hundred dollars). Twenty-four Northwest Indiana communities are members. Everyone serving on the commission (one representative from each community, plus two at large) is an unpaid volunteer. The commission is in its 13th year.

KEY WORDS: Citizen Initiatives; Ethics Code; Ethics Training; Ethics Leadership; Local Government Ethics

In 2005, a small ad hoc group of private citizens, public employees, and local elected officials from Northwest Indiana came together for the purpose of addressing ethics in local government. This three-county area had experienced a fair amount of one-party rule, machine politics, and perhaps more than its share of indictments and convictions (Davich 2017). By one account, more than 80 public officials and associated contractors have been convicted of federal crimes in a recent three-decade period (Chase 2018).

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Given this history, members of the ad hoc group felt local government might not be serving its constituents as well as it should. Concern was also expressed that Northwest Indiana's political climate could be inhibiting economic development that was badly needed because of the decline of the steel industry, once the area's dominant and still major employer (Konrady 2016).

But what could be done over a multi-jurisdictional area with 44 towns, cities, and counties all packed into a geographical area with less than a million people and no central city or overarching legal authority?

A relevant model could not be found. Many volunteer good-government groups seem to focus more broadly on public-policy issues. The League of Women Voters, for example, encourages "informed and active participation in government" and works "to increase understanding of public policy issues and influence public policy through education and advocacy" (League of Women Voters 2019). The Better Government Association of Illinois (BGA) utilizes staff and volunteers in a watchdog role to promote "transparency, efficiency and accountability" in local government (BGA 2019). The BGA model would help expose improper behavior after it occurs but would not provide a mechanism for setting standards for ethical behavior. The ad hoc group decided to focus on prevention—establishing expectations—rather than exposing wrongdoing after the fact.

After considerable discussion, the ad hoc group concluded that trying to create an ethics czar with enforcement authority would not be politically possible, given the fractured structure of local government, and besides, no mechanism existed through which such a position could be developed. Although the ad hoc group thought the communities might be willing to provide limited financial support, this modest level of commitment would not provide sufficient funding for a paid staff. The only way forward seemed to be some sort of a mostly volunteer group.

So the challenge: How to create an entity of the willing with no enforcement power and no staff that nevertheless might have an impact on a region that could be described as possessing a "folklore of corruption," to use Gunnar Myrdal's often-quoted phrase (Gilman 2005:42)? While the odds may have been against success, and a failure risked increasing public cynicism (Gilman 2005:64), those who have been involved in this process over the past 13 years believe that tangible, though incomplete, results can be demonstrated. Defining research as any published work that adds to the knowledge of a subject (Menzel 2015), the purpose of this article is to report on how one group of communities is approaching this issue, despite structural limitations, guided by the belief that sustainable ethical improvement may come gradually in small but incremental steps (Geuras and Garofalo 2011:402).

STRUCTURE

The resulting organization with the somewhat awkward name of the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission (SEAC) came into existence in November 2005 with the town councils of Highland and Munster and the City Council of Crown Point convening at a popular local restaurant not located in any of the three communities. In alphabetical order, each council adopted an identical interlocal agreement, creating SEAC. The

Interlocal Agreement gives every member community a seat at the table—in fact, two seats because there are two boards: SEAC ("the commission") and the board of delegates, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Ethics in Government Nortwest Indiana Approach
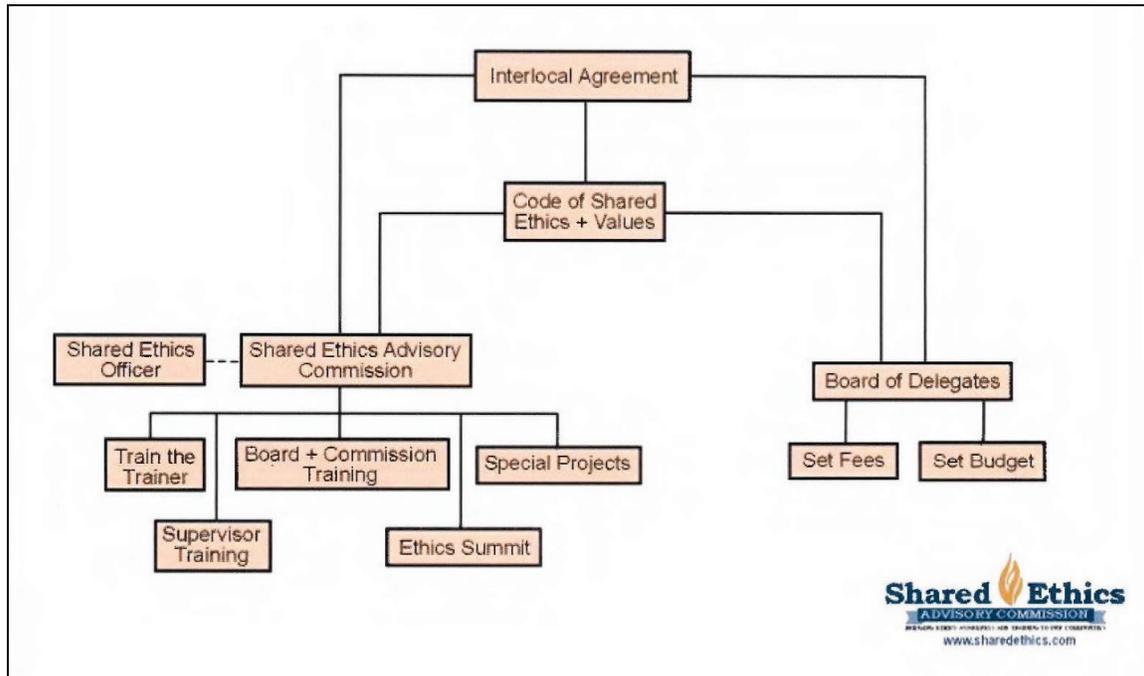
The commission comprises private citizens selected by their communities' political leadership, plus a smaller number of at-large members chosen by the other commissioners. The commission is responsible for programming. The board of delegates is the fiscal body and is composed of an elected official from each member community. The commission meets six times annually, and the board twice and sometimes three times each year to approve the budget and determine membership dues. The ad hoc group believed that having elected officials set the amount of dues and approve the budget would add credibility to the effort, hence the rationale for the two boards. This structure requires regular involvement by a sizeable number of people for an activity that has only a $30,000 budget. On occasion, achieving a quorum has been challenging. Too much structure can, of course, bog down the process and make it unworkable (Gilman 2005:64). Still, the involvement of a large number of citizens and elected officials has given SEAC a higher profile.

Each member community is required to pay a one-time enrollment fee and annual dues. Enrollment fees range from $500 to $5,000, and annual dues from $150 to $1,800. These charges are based on the number of full-time employees a member community has (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Cost of SEAC Membership

Shared Ethics
ADVISORY COMMISSION

Cost of Membership*

Enrollment Fee

	Lump Sum	Two Installments
More than 150 employees	$5,000	$2,500/2,500
101 to 150 employees	$2,500	$1,250/1,250
50 to 100 employees	$1,500	$ 750/750
Less than 50 employees	$ 500	$ 250/250

Annual Membership Fee   (after satisfying Enrollment Charge)

More than 150 employees	$1,800
101 to 150 employees	$ 900
50 to 100 employees	$ 300
Less than 50 employees	$ 150

*** Subject to Annual Review**

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No salaries are paid to anyone for service on the commission or the board of delegates. This is the reason SEAC can accomplish the programs described in the next

section with only a modest level of funding. Of course, without staff, what SEAC can hope to accomplish is necessarily limited.

For the first several years, clerical and support services were provided pro bono by individual commission members and the manager's office of one of the member communities. This arrangement lacked sustainability. In 2015, SEAC contracted with the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission for office and staff support. Now, SEAC has a telephone number as well as street and e-mail addresses to supplement its long-standing website (www.sharedethics.com).

PROGRAM OF WORK

Having no guide or example to follow other than the wording of the Interlocal Agreement, the original member communities had to find their own way. In the words of the Interlocal Agreement, "The mission of the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission [is] to promote and educate local government officials on ethical concepts and practices throughout the geographic region of Northwest Indiana."

Initially, SEAC identified and hired professional ethics trainers to present ethics insights at half-day group meetings of department heads and supervisors. With only three member communities, this was a feasible way to begin and to have at least some impact on an important segment of the public workforce. Even when membership grew to five communities, this approach could work. With present membership at 24 communities, exclusive reliance on one mass training session per year was no longer an optimal approach. Moreover, there was a growing consensus among SEAC commissioners that every employee, not just department heads, needed direct training on ethical decision making. SEAC member communities are urban, rural, and suburban, and aging manufacturing centers and affluent communities, ranging in population from about 80,000 people down to a few hundred, with a rich mixture of races and ethnicities.

TRAIN-THE-TRAINER

With so many member communities and thousands of employees, SEAC decided to ask each community to identify two to five of its employees who could be prepared to conduct ethics training for their coworkers. Two local professors were hired to develop and subsequently update a comprehensive training manual that includes four curricula, each similar but differing in detail and presentation length from a half hour to two hours. At a half-day train-the-trainer session, employees designated by their community as ethics trainers are taught how to use the materials and lead discussion of short dilemmas included in the training materials. More than 60 employees have been recruited and prepared as ethics trainers. SEAC asks member communities to add ethics training to their regular training schedule and to offer it at least once every other year. Training includes a mixture of lecture, dialogue about community-specific issues, and discussion of practical dilemmas. There are sufficient dilemmas so that the trainers should not have to repeat any of them more than once every three to six years, depending on the frequency of a particular community's ethics training and the number of dilemmas

discussed during each presentation. Small group training sessions are encouraged to enhance active dialogue. Literature supports the proposition that adult learning is best when it is interactive and as specific as possible to the employees' actual employment circumstances (West and Berman 2004:192, 203), and this, coupled with an introductory presentation of general ethics principles to provide context for discussing the dilemmas, is the SEAC approach (Gilman 2005:45; West and Berman 2004:195).

With so many different trainers, a continuing concern is consistency and quality of training. Each attendee is asked to complete a short evaluation form, but it has been difficult to have those evaluations delivered to the volunteer SEAC representative for that community. A second monitoring tool is the employee ethics survey described later in this article. A continuing responsibility of SEAC commissioners is to encourage local leadership to remain committed to providing ethics training regularly.

SEAC recognizes that its approach has additional limitations. Literature on ethics training for public employees does not discuss the qualifications of ethics trainers, so the train-the-trainer approach lacks the support of empirical data. Moreover, SEAC training sessions are shorter than some studies have thought to be effective. Van Montfort, Beck, and Twijnstra (2013:123) found no long-term impact from ethics training in a study of two Dutch communities. In light of these numerous uncertainties, the question has to be asked whether all this activity matters. Lots of effort has been put in, but what are the results? SEAC accepts that a public employee can be described as acting ethically if he or she is aware of the ethical implications of a situation, has a framework for determining what to do about it, and acts upon that knowledge (Montfort et al. 2013:118). Of course, defining the goal of "ethical competency" (Meine and Dunn 2013:150) is easier than achieving it. While some question the efficacy of ethics training to accomplish these benchmarks, SEAC believes its employee ethics survey, discussed in "Measuring Impact," below, provides at least some validation of its training.

DEPARTMENT-HEAD TRAINING

As noted above, department heads were the initial focus of SEAC's training efforts. Once the approach was changed to training all employees, department heads were expected to attend those sessions with their coworkers. Realizing that department heads have additional responsibilities not fully addressed in the regular training sessions, however, SEAC reinitiated a multicommunity training session just for them. A professional trainer is hired to provide training focused on department heads' important additional role of setting the ethics tone for their area of responsibility (Menzel 2015:353). The goal of this training is to encourage department heads to be proactive even daily in building an ethics culture in their area of responsibility. Each member community is encouraged to send its department heads to this training session, which occurs every other year.

BOARD AND COMMISSION TRAINING

SEAC leadership also recognized the need to train another important group of community officials: private citizens serving on their communities' boards and commissions.

Appointees to these bodies face potentially significant conflicts of interest in granting zoning variances, awarding construction contracts, and purchasing and redeveloping property, as well as myriad other matters they oversee. Potential conflicts may be subtle and not immediately recognized. The professional trainers retained for these presentations are therefore asked to focus on how to identify and properly respond to conflict-of-interest situations. This training is provided every other year, alternating with department-head training. Board and commission training is in the evening because many people serving in these capacities have daytime jobs. Training is also scheduled in a month with a fifth week because few Northwest Indiana boards and commissions meet during that week. Both department-head and board-and-commission training are expensive, as one involves lunch, the other dinner, and both require a professional ethics trainer). With the commission's limited budget, only one or the other is affordable in any given year.

Other than a three-question survey administered at the end of each board-and-commission training session, no measure has yet been developed to test the effectiveness of this training. The three questions (What did you like? What did you not like? What are your suggestions for change?) are more for planning the next session than for determining if behavior has been affected. Measuring training effectiveness for public employees is difficult enough; for private citizens serving in part-time (albeit important) positions, the challenge seems some factor more difficult. No research literature could be found. If nothing else, training these individuals removes the old refrain "no one ever told me it was wrong," a minimalist validation, to be sure (Siewert and Udani 2016:269).

ETHICS SUMMIT

After four years of providing ethics training for public employees, SEAC decided in its fifth year to host what is now known as the Ethics Summit (initially the Ethics in Government Breakfast). Each spring, the general public and people from the public sector are invited to attend a morning-long event with attendees seated crescent-style, six per table. Some years, seating is assigned to ensure that people at each table come from different communities, an unpopular approach with many participants who prefer to sit with their friends and coworkers.

SEAC's president gives a very brief overview of commission activities; then a keynote speaker (e.g., a judge; a U.S. attorney; a retired elected official, including high-profile people such as a former governor or congressman; an ethicist; someone else with credentials to speak on ethics in government) presents remarks. The keynote address is followed by table discussions of dilemmas prepared for the event by local university students under the direction of their professors. After 20 minutes of discussion, each table selects a spokesperson to present their conclusions to the assembled audience, followed by keypad voting by the entire audience to determine a consensus on the main ethical issues of a particular case. Each summit's dilemmas and group consensus answers are posted on SEAC's website (www.sharedethics.com).

Some years, instead of dilemmas, other formats have been tried, including a panel of local elected officials expressing their views on ethics and answering audience

questions. On one occasion, the panel included a town manager, a political reporter for a local newspaper, and the professor who had overseen the writing of dilemmas for previous summits. On another occasion, a debate between two local high school championship debate teams focused on the policy and ethical implications of public officials absent from performing their public responsibilities for prolonged periods. The most popular format continues to be dilemmas with audience participation. The summit is presented without charge, usually from 8:30 to 11:30, and attracts 200 to 300 people each year. Participant evaluations have been very positive. As with board-and-commission training, measuring effectiveness is difficult. A survey with the same three questions is administered at the end of the morning, and again, its main purpose is to assist in planning next year's program; however, SEAC believes the summit is useful in several respects: (1) It mixes public employees from different communities with different experiences—urban, rural, suburban, large, and small; (2) the mix of public- and private-sector participants provides an additional variety of points of view; and (3) this event attracts substantial media coverage, with the result of higher visibility for the topic of ethics in government.

ETHICS POLICY CHECKLIST

Recognizing that member communities might have differing levels of detail and sophistication in their personnel policies, SEAC felt it would be helpful to develop guidelines that communities could use in reviewing and developing their own policies. The final product is the 12-page Ethics Policy Checklist. This document, which has been distributed to all member communities, does not attempt to be a complete policy to be adopted whole cloth. Instead, it simply lists the various issues that SEAC believes should be addressed by each community's policies. The checklist mostly consists of a series of questions, but for a few issues, it presents alternate options. A checklist approach seemed the best way to assist communities in developing comprehensive ethics policies while recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach would not likely fit the needs of SEAC's diverse membership (Gilman 2005:64). SEAC-based ethics training necessarily assumes that ethical matters confronting frontline employees are covered by the community's policy manual. It would be unfair and confusing for employees to hear one thing in their ethics training only to find out when a problem arises that the community's policies are silent on or inconsistent with what they were taught (Meine and Dunn 2013:162). The checklist helps resolve this problem.

The checklist was developed with the assistance of volunteer town managers from two member communities who reviewed the existing policies of several local communities and also drew on their professional knowledge and background. Their work product was further reviewed and discussed by a SEAC committee drawing on members' private-sector experiences.

CANDIDATE ETHICS ACTION PLEDGE

Because SEAC is a group of the willing, it is important that elected officials be reminded in a public way that ethics training is important. One way this is accomplished is by

individual SEAC commissioners maintaining regular contact with their communities' political leadership. Another opportunity is at election time. For each primary and general election, candidate lists are obtained from the three counties' boards of elections. These listings include candidate names and street addresses. Using this data, SEAC sends every candidate in its three-county area the Candidate Ethics Actions Pledge. Even candidates in nonmember communities are asked to sign the pledge. (See Figure 3.)

The pledge does not ask candidates to commit to personally being ethical (that seemed presumptuous). Candidates are not even asked to pledge to support joining SEAC. The sole commitment requested is the candidates' promise to provide ethics training for employees under their jurisdiction. Joining SEAC is a cost-effective way to fulfill this commitment, but if the community can find some other way, fine.

Despite the narrow focus of the pledge, some candidates still refuse to sign. A few have said they were insulted to be asked to sign the pledge. Others, missing the point of the pledge, said they were already personally ethical and thus did not need to sign. Because names of candidates signing the pledge are given to the local media, some who have not signed have accused SEAC of "blackmail" or "extortion," or at least of attempting to embarrass them. At SEAC's regular meetings, these complaints have been discussed and wording changes made to clarify the pledge's limited purpose. SEAC continues to feel that the Candidate Ethics Action Pledge is reasonable, appropriate, and in the public's best interest.

The pledge is not intended to modify behavior of the individual candidate except to the extent of providing the candidate's employees with ethics training. Perhaps the large number of communities joining SEAC during the past two election cycles is some indication that the pledge is accomplishing its intended purpose. During future election cycles, membership recruitment will continue to be a focus.

IMPORTANT LIMITATION

Even though the word "advisory" is part of SEAC's full name, the Interlocal Agreement does not grant SEAC authority to adjudicate or even issue advisory opinions on specific situations. This is a wise limitation, as without a paid professional staff, it would be inappropriate for SEAC to attempt issuing opinions on particular circumstances. Enforcement remains the function of each community. Lacking a central enforcement authority, it has not been possible for SEAC to determine if enforcement is consistent, fair, and appropriate (but see the next section for the discussion of the Employee Ethics Survey).

MEASURING IMPACT

People often find it difficult to precisely define ethics. There are several commonsense ways of describing the concept: "Always do the 'right' thing"; "Follow the Golden Rule"; "Would your mother approve?" and "How would you feel if your actions were reported in tomorrow's media?" Sometimes, SEAC representatives are told that ethics is just a matter of each person's conscience.

Figure 3. SEAC 2019 Candidate Ethics Action Pledge

A bit of truth resides in all these characterizations, but they are not always helpful in the specific circumstances that public employees may face, or for reaching ethics competency. Sometimes, a favor may seem minor or just an act of kindness. An employee may feel that accepting a gift will not compromise his or her judgment, or that "borrowing" public equipment for a one-time personal use is not a serious matter. SEAC's attempt at a more precise definition of ethics is found in its Code of Shared Ethics and Values (Figure 4), which each member community is asked to adopt by resolution.

This code does not replace any local ordinances or policies but forms the basis of SEAC's ethics training curriculum. Although employees are not expected to memorize the code, they are asked to consider it as a reference. Poster-size copies are provided to member communities, with the request that the posters be hung in employee break rooms. The code describes four broad ethics principles (or is it eight?): honesty/integrity, respect/civility, accountability/responsibility, and fairness/justice. Another 32 statements listed under these headings amplify the broad principles. The code is intended to be more than just a list of dos and don'ts, more aspirational than proscriptive, and recognizes that gray areas require informed judgment. Some scholarship suggests this "high road" approach is more likely to be effective (Siewert and Udani 2016:271, 286). SEAC shied away from an absolutist approach (seeing every situation as black or white), for fear it could produce an outcome opposite to what was intended, resulting in rule dodging and hair splitting rather than ethical behavior (Menzel 2015:354). SEAC intends its code as a framework in which ethics training occurs (Meine and Dunn 2013:153).

To test whether the code and ethics training are having an impact, SEAC periodically conducts a 13-question survey of employees in member communities. The most recent survey (Figure 5) was administered in 2015–2016, with about 1500 responses.

Answers from employees who said they received ethics training were compared to answers from those who had not been trained (Figure 6). Responses indicated that trained employees were much more aware of the code and were more likely to know how to report an ethics violation, to believe that corrective action would be taken, and that the action taken would be appropriate. These results are statistically significant at the .05 level. Responses to other questions were also encouraging. Trained employee responses to the question "Have you witnessed unethical behavior in the past year?" have shown a substantial decline from the first survey in 2009 (Figure 6). Even for untrained employees, a similar, though less substantial, pattern is shown. One possible explanation for the greater decline for trained employees is a more precise understanding of what constitutes unethical behavior rather than just an action or decision the employee does not agree with. The trend for both trained and untrained employees may indicate that heightened awareness of ethical issues and procedures is spreading throughout the workplace (Siewart and Udani 2016:282). Of course, a subjective question of this nature may be subject to social desirability bias, producing results that the respondent considers to be expected and possibly more favorable than reality (Siewart and Udani 2016:284).

Figure 4. SEAC Code of Shared Ethics and Values

Figure 5. SEAC Employee Ethics Survey

SHARED ETHICS ADVISORY COMMISSION
EMPLOYEE ETHICS SURVEY

Fall, 2015

Dear local official or employee,

The Shared Ethics Advisory Commission is very interested in your response to the following questions about ethics in your workplace. The purpose of the survey is to determine your awareness of ethical issues and your familiarity with procedures for reporting alleged unethical behavior in the workplace.

While this survey is voluntary, we sincerely hope you will take a few minutes to complete it, seal it in the attached envelope and mail it to us. **Please respond within one week.** The results will be tabulated at Indiana University Northwest. The information will give us valuable insight on how best to serve you and the residents of our participating communities. Based on the results, future ethics training may be revised and recommendations developed about ethical processes.

> **PLEASE NOTE:** This survey is voluntary and is intended to be anonymous. Please do not refer to specific individuals in your answers and do not place your name anywhere on the survey.

Thank you for your participation in this important project.

Sincerely,
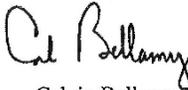
Calvin Bellamy,
Commission President

1. Please circle your local government unit.

Burns Harbor	East Chicago	Lake County	Ogden Dunes
Cedar Lake	Gary	La Porte County	Porter County
Chesterton	Hebron	Lowell	Schererville
Crown Point	Highland	Merrillville	Valparaiso
Dyer	Hobart	Munster	Whiting

2. Before you received this survey were you aware of the Shared Code of Ethics and Values created by the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission? Yes_____ No_____

3. Have you attended an ethics training program in the last 24 months? Yes_____ No_____

4. How important do you think ethics training is for you and your co-workers on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the most important? 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   (Circle One)

PLEASE CONTINUE ON THE OTHER SIDE

Figure 5. SEAC Employee Ethics Survey, concl.

5. During the last 12 months have you witnessed unethical behavior in your workplace?
   Yes_____ No_____

6. Are you aware of the process for reporting alleged unethical behavior in your workplace?
   Yes_____ No_____

7. Have you ever asked anyone in authority in your workplace for advice on any ethical issues?
   Yes_____ No_____

8. Have you ever reported alleged unethical misconduct to someone in authority at your work place?
   Yes_____ No_____

9. Would you report alleged unethical behavior in your workplace?
   Yes_____ No_____

10. If you were to report alleged unethical behavior, do you think someone would care enough to take action?
    Yes_____ No_____

11. If you were to report alleged unethical behavior, do you believe it would receive a fair and appropriate response?
    Yes_____ No_____

12. What ethical issues are you most concerned about in your workplace? (Mark all that apply)

    a._____ Misuse of city/town resources
    b._____ Favoritism (employee receiving undeserved or unclaimed rewards)
    c._____ Conflict of interest
    d._____ Other (Please specify) _____

    _____

    e._____ None

13. Do you have any recommendations for the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission on how to improve ethics awareness in your workplace? Yes_____ No_____ If yes, please explain.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.   KD_7756610_1.docx

Figure 6. Response to SEAC Ethics Survey
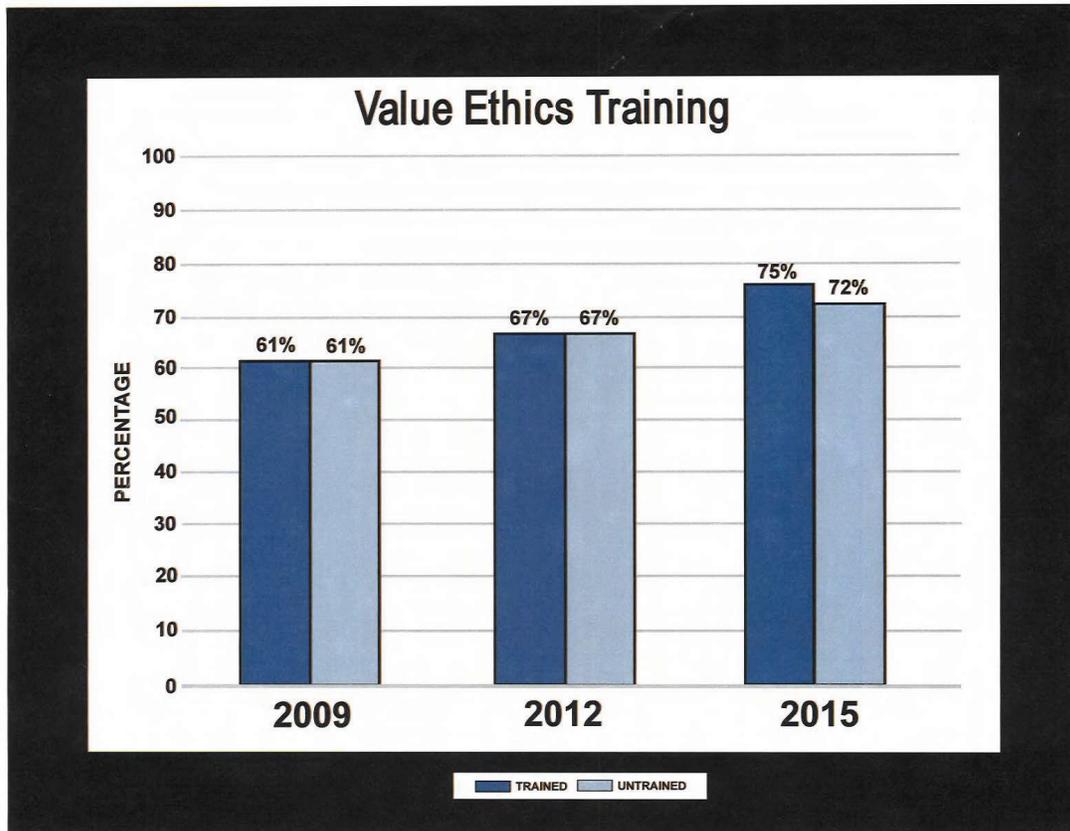
Responses to two other questions may indicate that training has also had a positive effect on employee morale (believing that corrective action would be taken if an infraction were reported and that the action be appropriate). Again, results are more positive for trained compared to untrained employees. Research by West and Berman (2004:199) indicates that a vigorous ethics training program can improve the organizational culture, improve labor-management relations, and increase employee productivity. Survey responses may indicate that SEAC's program is having a similar impact.

One possibly anomalous result, which could reflect social-desirability bias, is the dichotomy between the high percentage who say they would report ethics violations and the low number who actually did so, yet over the history of the survey, both trained and untrained employees reported witnessing less unethical behavior, which could at least partially explain the large difference in "would report" and "did report."

Note that responses to one of the questions hardly varied between the two groups of employees. The responses of both trained and untrained employees to the question "Do you value ethics training?" were a resounding "yes."[1] This result was generally the same in 2009, 2011, and 2015. Apparently, ethics training "fatigue" has not occurred over the years.

To limit social-desirability bias, the survey has been conducted anonymously, initially by use of paper forms returned by postage-paid mail to a third party. The most recent survey was conducted largely online using the Qualtrics platform. For employees without internet access, the traditional paper form was made available. For future surveys, member communities will be encouraged to do ethics training in the year preceding the survey to better test for long-term impact of the training. Some research has found that training produced no longer-term effect (Montfort et al. 2013:113). SEAC survey results would suggest otherwise, both in response comparisons of trained and untrained employees and in the generally positive trend lines from the first survey in 2009 to the most recent in 2015–2016; however, all three surveys have highlighted a continuing concern by significant numbers of employees (both trained and untrained) about misuse of public property, favoritism, and conflicts of interest. SEAC trainers have been urged to increase focus on these issues.

For each survey, a detailed report has been prepared containing two parts: (1) overall results and trends drawn from all respondents and (2) an analysis of the unique survey responses from each member community's employees, with SEAC recommendations to address expressed concerns. Copies of each report have been distributed to elected leadership and local media.

Across the board, survey trend lines are generally positive, but one caveat needs noting: Although the survey questions have remained basically the same, the comparison is not perfect, as employees from only five communities took the survey in 2009, and seven in 2012, compared with 20 in the latest survey.

WHY AREN'T ALL COMMUNITIES MEMBERS?

By one measure, SEAC has been successful in reaching out to Northwest Indiana communities. Starting with just three suburban communities, SEAC has grown to 24 cities, towns, and counties, yet when measured by a potential membership of 44, there is still a considerable way to go. Some nonmembers are very small, with only a handful of employees. Others, however, are larger, with hundreds of employees. All but the very smallest communities have been approached about joining. Why have some failed to sign on? SEAC has been given various reasons, which the readers of this article can judge for themselves:

> *Ethics can't be taught.* If this is so, parents, ministers, professional organizations, and many others have wasted many hours explaining right from wrong. People holding this point of view do not explain the true source of ethical behavior.)

> *We already learned about ethics at home, school, or church.* This response at least recognizes that there is a role for instruction, but apparently only somewhere other than the workplace. One elected official even boldly asserted in

a public meeting that he had learned everything he needed to know about ethics by the time he was five years old. Despite Robert Fulghum's popular 2003 book, SEAC believes that a kindergarten-level grasp of ethics is hardly adequate for dealing with the challenges an adult faces in the context of public employment. Ethics education is a lifelong process, and is at its best when reinforced with examples and discussion directly relevant to an individual's specific circumstances. As noted above, scholarly research seems to support this conclusion.

Our employees all have common sense. One council president asserted her town only hires people with common sense and they therefore do not need ethics training. Common sense has to come from someplace. Furthermore, common sense does not seem to be all that common these days.

Joining is like bragging or apologizing. Some community leaders incredibly say they aren't joining because it will seem like they are bragging about how good they are. Maybe more understandable, but still not correct, are those communities who fail to join because they feel like they are admitting that something is wrong in their communities, as if providing safety training is an admission of an unsafe work environment. Responding to these inconsistent reasons is difficult, but both explanations may actually represent fear of ethics training, what Geuras and Garofalo (2011:43) refer to as ethics aversion syndrome.

Membership is too costly. Tight budgets are a fact of life for most communities, but SEAC's fees are modest, and for many potential members, the cost would be only in the few hundreds of dollars, as set out in Figure 2.

Naysayers are not unique to Northwest Indiana. Other researchers have found similar reasons given for not providing employees with ethics training (West and Berman 2004:202–03).

SEAC recognizes that there are costs besides enrollment fee and annual dues. A member community is asked to provide two to five employees with enough release time to attend a half-day train-the-trainer session. Then there is the time away from the job while every employee receives from half an hour to two hours of ethics training at least every other year. These modest commitments are essential if a community wishes to take full advantage of SEAC membership.

CONCLUSION

What a group of volunteers can accomplish is necessarily limited, but the experience of the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission indicates that positive outcomes can indeed be achieved over a period of several years and even on a multicommunity basis. The purpose of public-employee ethics training is not to make every employee an ethicist but rather to give every employee a framework in which to make judgments about situations encountered and to inform employees on how to address their concerns. Public employees in Northwest Indiana are very supportive of ethics training, but it is a continuing challenge to keep the training fresh and nonrepetitive, and also to keep elected leadership engaged. Ethics is not a once-and-done proposition. Training on ethical decision making needs to be built into each community's training schedule so that ethics training occurs at least once every two years. SEAC believes public-sector ethics programs should include but not be limited to frontline employees, as important as they are. Department heads and supervisors need more focused training that emphasizes their role in setting the tone for their area of responsibility. Also important is addressing the particular challenges that may confront private citizens serving on boards and commission. Even dialogue between public employees and individuals with no direct involvement in local government is helpful in expanding information about and hopefully gaining commitment to an ethics culture. SEAC's Ethics Summit is a well-received attempt to encourage such engagement. Taken all together, the SEAC program has something familiar (ethics code as well as employee and supervisor training) and something less common (board and commission training and the Ethics Summit).

Of course, ethics training, no matter how comprehensive or inclusive, is not a panacea. Effective leadership, comprehensive personnel policies, vigorous law enforcement, and a vigilant media are also needed, but the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission believes that ethics training is an important element in the mosaic of good government.

ENDNOTE

1. A respondent was deemed to "value" ethics training if he or she rated ethics training at 7 or higher on the scale of 1 to 10.

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