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EDITOR'S PICK

Working toward ethical government

Calvin Bellamy

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Cal Bellamy

Provided

Kemi Badenoch reacts to bud...

Calvin Bellamy

Twenty years is a long time, especially for a group of volunteers pursuing an on-going mission, working without staff and limited financial resources. The key ingredient is always a group of dedicated volunteers who believe in the mission. This

is the story of the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission, celebrating its 20th anniversary this year.

The Shared Ethics Advisory Commission (SEAC) believes that ethical government is good government. We realize that SEAC is only a part, but an invaluable part, of ensuring good government. We are encouraged that 23 Northwest Indiana counties, towns and cities have demonstrated their commitment to ethical government by joining SEAC.

Hiring: Good governance begins with hiring — hiring people who care about their community and want to do the right thing. Most public employees meet these requirements, but they don't automatically know how to do their jobs in the right way. They need to be trained on their duties and expectations.

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Training: If employees are not told how to do their jobs and what is expected of them, they will guess, misinterpret, feel lost, or just copy what others are doing. This uncertainty can be the breeding ground for bad judgment and bad behavior. This is why all workplaces train and retrain their employees. (X)

Everyone wants to avoid injury, but employees without safety training are much more likely to injure themselves or others. The same is true with ethical decision-making. If employees are expected to avoid conflicts of interest, not be influenced by gifts and treat the public and their co-workers with respect, then they need training on how to

be ethical. It is not fair to expect employees to act in an ethical manner if they are not trained on how to react in those gray areas where the ethics of the issue may not be clear.

This is where SEAC comes in ... we create and help organize ethics training for all employees of our member communities. SEAC also provides specialized ethics training for department managers and for private citizens serving on boards and commissions. Spreading the net further, each year we host an Ethics Summit open free of charge to the public. Finally, in election years, we ask every local town, city and county candidate to pledge to provide ethics training for their employees and to establish strong whistleblower protection. However, as essential as it is, ethics training alone cannot do the job.

Consequences: Yes, hire good people, train them on ethics and other things to help them succeed in their jobs. In a perfect world, this should be enough, but it's not a perfect world. What's expected needs to be defined and explained, but also needed is a mechanism to act when things go wrong.

Most SEAC member communities have procedures for employees to voice their concern if they see something they think is wrong or unethical. These procedures are good, but not enough.

The state of Indiana has an inspector general to investigate and recommend appropriate corrective action. But that person's authority and scope is limited to employees of the state's executive branch.

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This year a bill was introduced in the Indiana House of Representatives to create local inspectors general. Unfortunately, it did not pass. An inspector general at the local level would give the needed boost for local governments seeking to serve their constituents well: Hire well, train on ethical behavior and establish an independent body to investigate inappropriate behavior. Those three steps close the circle.

Kemi Badenoch reacts to bud...

SEAC is limited to the training function. We know this is not enough by itself, but we pledge to keep doing all that we can to promote ethics in local government.



Calvin Bellamy, a lifelong resident of Northwest Indiana, is a co-founder of the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission. The opinions are the writer's.



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