SHARED ETHICS ADVISORY COMMISSION

SERVING NWI SINCE 2005



2025 Ethics Summit

CASE STUDIES

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CASE #1: Snow Job

Paul has worked in the street department for over 20 years. He has been a good employee and last year was promoted to department manager. He believes the department is functioning well and that his leadership is the reason.

Lately Town Councilman Jeb has been questioning various aspects of department spending and management. Paul resents this, calling it "nitpicking." It has gotten to the point that the two have exchanged strong words at some council meetings.

Paul decides he's had enough and announces his candidacy for Jeb's seat. He mentions his candidacy to his staff and encourages their support.

Meanwhile, a bad winter with heavy snow is expected within the next few weeks. Paul's budget includes funds for two new trucks equipped with snowplows. He had talked informally with vehicle dealers in town, and none expressed interest. His wife's cousin is married to Randy who owns a truck dealership in the next county. Paul talks to him about the trucks. Randy reports that he can get the trucks quickly and at the "right price."

Paul decides to proceed without competitive bids citing unique circumstances: no local dealer is interested, the rapid approach of winter and a price he believes will save the city a "substantial amount" well under the budgeted amount.

When Jeb finds out about the circumstances of the purchase, he again criticizes Paul and demands he be reprimanded.

Did Paul act correctly? Is Jeb responding appropriately? What ethical issues do you see?

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CASE #2: Tree Hugger

The County Park department has been increasing its staff by hiring recent graduates of a local university. Allison was particularly pleased to be chosen because of her strong interest in environmental issues.

The new hires were timely because of the plans for a large new park in the rural area of the county. The land is highly forested, but to make the land usable by the public many trees would need to be cut down.

Allison is aghast at the idea of destroying so many "beautiful trees." She joined in demonstrations at the County Government Center on the evenings the County Council met. On weekends, she passes out flyers at other county parks or other public places objecting to the plans for the new park. Her personal social media site is largely about the importance of saving trees and contains links to some controversial environment action.

Because the department's headquarters is at a remote location, nearly all central office employees remain in the building at lunchtime. Allison began hosting what she called a "Lunch and Learn" program whereby she would lecture her coworkers on her objections to the park plan or announce the next demonstration and urge participation. Some employees objected to being a captive audience for Allison's lectures. but the department head does not want to get involved and tells the complaining employees "deal with it."

Meanwhile, at the department's recent budget hearing, several councilmen expressed concern about these repeated demonstrations and Allison's leadership role, one member demanding she be fired "or else."

In response, the Department head decides to move Allison to the Department's most urban park to oversee the athletic program there. He orders her to focus on athletics and "leave everything else alone."

Was Allison's behavior proper? Was leadership's response appropriate? Do you see any ethical issues?

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CASE #3: Planning Ahead

The much beloved Director of Planning recently retired. Under his leadership, there was a relaxed, collegial work environment, but some on the Council thought the department wasn't as efficient as it should be.

As the new director of planning, the Council hired a retired officer from the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers. He is well experienced and has the reputation of being a strict disciplinarian who gets the job done.

The change in leadership style was a shock to the staff. At the first staff meeting, the new director laid out a strict schedule for work completion. The staff felt some of the deadlines were unrealistic. Several voiced concerns. The director doubled down and his weekly emails to the staff now have a phrase below his name, "The whip is in the drawer -- for now." No one was sure whether he is joking.

Several staff members discussed all this on breaks and decided to teach the new guy a lesson. They agreed to find every detail possible to slow down project review. They also agreed to schedule vacation time so that the department would be shorthanded during peak times. Some also talked to developers who come to the office, mentioning that their department was having problems and they might be wise to take their project to a neighboring town.

Where this all was going to end was uncertain, tension was high.

What ethical issues do you see here?