SHARED ETHICS ADVISORY COMMISSION

SERVING NWI SINCE 2005

2026 Ethics Summit

CASE STUDIES



The Old Man

Jake has worked for the county for many years, decades really. While he is well past retirement age, he has no intention of actually retiring. He runs his department well, but he has many habits from another era that tend to aggravate some of his staff, especially the younger ones.

For example, he calls all his male employees “boys,” and the women as “girls,” rarely using their actual name. His language is coarse, frequently sprinkled with vulgar words and phrases. He also chews tobacco, which he spits into a closed container next to his desk.

A couple of his staff thought of complaining to Human Resources, but Jake’s younger sister is the Human Resources director and is thought to also be “rough around the edges.”

So instead, they approach Bob, a respected member of the county council and known to be a friend of Jake’s, asking him to talk to Jake informally about the issues bothering the staff. Bob is not willing to do so, saying, “He’s my friend, and I don’t want to hurt his feelings.” Anticipating that is what Bob would say, they then ask if he would consider introducing a resolution to create an anonymous tip/complaint line. Again, he is reluctant to do so, but agrees to do so if they can find employees from other departments who would like such a line established.

If they are not willing or able to find supporters in other departments, he will help them get on the agenda of the next council meeting, but makes it clear, they will be on their own.

Are there issues with Jake’s behavior? With Bob’s response? Are the employees handling the matter properly?

Helping Hands

Stanley, the director of public works, is thinking about running for an open seat on the town council. He wants to raise his visibility and to do so, joins three high-profile community organizations.

He spends some time at the office making event preparations, preparing invitations and promoting membership for all three organizations. For one of them, he also does some record keeping. Even though all of these activities are performed on city time, he gets his town projects done on time and provides effective supervision over the employees in his department.

The council decided that this Spring the town would commit considerable resources to upgrading several of its parks. Once the project is over, a half truckload of dirt is left over. The contractor does not want to buy it back.

Stanley knows that one of his non-profits could use the soil, so he has his staff load the extra soil on a town truck, deliver it to the non-profit and spread it out over the non-profit's property. Later that year, the non-profit named Stanley as its citizen of the year. He makes sure that his recognition is reported to the media.

Do you see any ethical issues?

Dog Run

Joan, a long-time employee, was transferred to the County Recorder's office after returning from medical leave. Previously she worked at the Public Works office in a separate building. She requested the reassignment because of what she felt was a hostile work environment under the now-retired public works director.

Joan has always been a good employee, but since returning to work seems somewhat unsettled. A friend suggested that she acquire a "comfort dog," which she did. She brings Clarence to work every day. He's a large, but friendly, dog who wanders around the office, stopping at other employees' desks. Some like his visits; others don't, especially Harriett, who has a strong allergy to dogs.

After Harriet complained, Joan avoids Harriett altogether and feels she is being selfish and inconsiderate of Joan's needs. The staff is divided into two camps: Those who agree with Harriett and those who agree with Joan. Some of Joan's supporters have talked of bringing their cats and dogs to work.

To calm things down, the Recorder transferred Joan out of the back office to the front counter duties where she interacts with the public. Clarence is there with her and often jumps up to hold onto the staff side of the counter. Some town residents who come to the office enjoy seeing Clarence, others don't. Some are even a little afraid of Clarence.

What issues do you see here? How would you resolve them?