

Dealing with ethical violations

By Jennifer Kahnweiler, December 2005
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Q: "I have been witness to -- but did not take part in -- a violation of our company's ethics policy in the HR department I work in. Specifically, some critical reviews were removed from a supervisor's personnel file. I am in a dilemma: I would like to stay at this company but am worried that 'blowing the whistle' will mean the loss of my job -- particularly since there is little proof of this transgression other than my word. Is there any advice you can provide?"

A: Ethical dilemmas are never easy to solve. Having facts on your side is key in giving you the strength to make a tough decision. In sorting through the issues here are some questions to use.

1. Am I clear about the facts in this case? Perhaps you don't know the whole picture. Since you aren't privy to the background and rationale for the removal of these reviews it makes it hard to know for sure if this was an ethical violation. (maybe there was a legal agreement made with the supervisor that you are not aware of.) So do your best to find out the "back story."

2. What aspect of your company's policy was violated? Be sure you can cite the policy transgression so you are prepared when and if you move this forward.

3. What do the company's ethical guidelines say about who you should report ethical violations to and how it should be done? This person (often an ombudsman or other trusted individuals in and outside your company) can also help you sort through your next steps.

4. What do your profession's ethical guidelines dictate? SHRM's code of ethics for HR practitioners is online at www.shrm.org/ethics/code-of-ethics.asp. In the case you describe, it is possible that both the Use of Information and Conflict of Interest clauses may have been transgressed here. In particular, the SHRM guidelines state that we "acquire and disseminate information through ethical and responsible means." It appears that the core principle of "maintaining a high level of trust with our stakeholders (i.e. the employees)" may have been compromised if records were inappropriately removed.

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ABOUT
YOU

Very possibly, your actions could affect your standing your career at your organization. That impact could be a negative or positive one. But, ultimately, your decision on what to do should reflect your strengths and convictions.

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