

**York Centre for Practical Ethics  
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**Workshop on Conflict of Interest in the Public Sector - March 24, 2005**

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When I began this paper, the first title that emerged was “Conflict of Interest: Why it is not such a bad thing and we should not shy away from it” But, before you think from this rather provocative statement, that I am being cavalier about the seriousness of the ethical issues that arise from conflict of interest in the public sector, I will explain what I mean.

I come to the topic of ethics in any group or organizational setting from a psychological point of view. We all understand that certain behaviours and actions in the public service undermine the public’s trust and interest. As a Jungian psychoanalyst, my exploration is not to provide the psychological rationale for what is right and wrong, but rather explore it in the service of psychological consciousness and self-awareness. The following statement from Carl Jung, the Swiss Psychiatrist and slightly younger contemporary of Sigmund Freud, might help to elucidate what I mean. Before I read it, I should say that he uses the phrase “conflict of duty” instead of “conflict of interest”. Jung wrote this in 1949.

*“ If a man is endowed with an ethical sense and is convinced of the sanctity of ethical values, he is on the surest road to a conflict of duty. And although this looks desperately like a moral catastrophe, it alone makes possible a higher differentiation of ethics and a broadening of consciousness. A conflict of duty*

*forces us to examine our conscience and therefore to discover the shadow [i.e. the part of us that we are unaware of].*

In my remarks this morning, I would like to touch on several themes:

- C the psychological mechanisms individually and in organizations which make it difficult for us to deal with these issues; and
- C why it is important for us to actively and consciously engage in ethical reflection.

Ultimately, it is important that organizational leaders create climates in their institutions which encourage such reflection, and foster integrity and an open non-punitive culture in the service of greater awareness.

I would like to try an experiment with you which will only take a second. Sit quietly for a moment and imagine that one of your colleagues in your department has been caught in some behaviour that goes against the rules of what is considered ethical behaviour. What is your immediate reaction - the first thing that pops into your head? What feelings arise?

Now imagine that it is you are the one who has been caught? What comes up for you this time? What questions are you asking yourself?

What I wanted to offer was the opportunity to see how we react when we make a mistake, not live up to certain standards of behaviour, or in moments of unconsciousness, succumb to natural human experiences such as fear, desire, fatigue

or anger. It is these emotions that test our ethical approach and our integrity. Do we hide, rationalize or become overly defensive as we try to protect a certain image of ourselves. And do our organizations help us to abdicate responsibility for our own behaviour by blaming and scapegoating others to carry the sins of the group.

In a climate where the public is demanding accountability in all areas of public service, the stakes are very high indeed for being perceived as unethical. And yet we can be challenged to move into a more sophisticated ethical stance when we recognize that we all can use denial, self-deception or fear to push these issues away. ***And, when we acknowledge and actively engage in our own personal conflicts of interests, we have the opportunity to exercise our ethical muscles and to broaden our consciousness.***

When a conflict does occur between our own self-interest and that of a higher ethical imperative, it is our conscience that tells us that a conflict exists. As an expression of morality, conscience reflects the acknowledgement of something that is greater than our personal needs, wishes and desires, and triggers the need for ethical reflection. Jungian analyst Ernest Blum, who wrote extensively on the psychological function of conscience in the 1950s, writes:

*“conscience directs itself to something in us, against something, . . . . It exercises a directing function causes us to orient ourselves to something”*

Often when we first experience our conscience, we experience vague feelings of doing something wrong, of guilt or ambivalence. It might trigger a memory of a childhood misdemeanour and consequent punishment by an authority figure. It is

often associated with feelings of doubt, anxiety, fear, shame, embarrassment and guilt, and psychologically, it is uncomfortable- very uncomfortable. It is our conscience that challenges the sense of who we are, our bearings, what we know and what we value. It is through our conscience that we can make ethical and moral decisions if we are willing to enter into the conflict.

At the same time, it is also natural to ward off these uncomfortable feelings by denying or repressing them.

Another aspect of this question is what is happening in our organizations. What is the “norm of fairness” considered acceptable in particular settings? If we see everyone else doing it, then we are more likely to do it too. And, the degree to which individuals are just going along with the crowd further reduces the level of expectations. What is the role that the underlying values and norms embedded in an organizational culture have? Does the organization support ethical reflection and integrity or is the culture toxic and reinforce blaming, defensive behaviour and scapegoating? What is the role of the leadership in creating an organizational culture of doing the right thing?

Organizations and groups have a powerful influence in the constellation of our conscience - or actually I should probably say, they have a powerful influence in the suppression of our conscience.

In 1921, Freud initiated the discussion of a psychoanalytical study of groups and organizations when he made some observations about "mobs" and mob psychology. He suggested that individuals in mobs feel a certain intimacy because they project their ego ideal onto the leader of the group. This projection then absolves the individual of having to make moral decisions because the leader then carries the superego functions of self-criticism and responsibility. Jung also

observed that groups have a tendency to lower the level of individual consciousness. Therefore, the degree to which individuals are merged psychologically with the organization, there can be an abdication of responsibility to the group to carry the ethical responsibility for each individual member. As a consequence, individuals in organizations can easily lose their sense of identity and also thereby experience a reduction in their ability to make ethical determinations. Here again is a quote of Jung:

*“It is a notorious fact that the morality of the society as a whole is in inverse ratio to its size; for the greater the aggregation of individuals, the more the individual factors are blotted out, and with them morality, which rests entirely on the moral sense of the individual and the freedom necessary for this. Hence every man is, in a certain sense, unconsciously a worse man when he is in society [or in a group] than when acting alone; for he is carried by society and to that extent relieved of his individual responsibility. Any large company composed of wholly admirable persons has the morality and intelligence of an unwieldy, stupid and violent animal. The bigger the organization, the more unavoidable is its immorality and blind stupidity.” (Vol 7. para 240)*

Now I would like to return to question of how do we react to our own weakness and limitations and talk briefly about the psychology of integrity. Unlike the concepts of ethics and morality which are more philosophical and possibly theologically based, integrity is rooted in psychology. The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy defines *integrity* as “the quality of a person who can be counted on to give precedence to moral considerations when there is a strong inducement to let

self-interest or some clamant desire override them, or when betrayal of a moral principle might pass undetected.” Another dictionary defines *integrity* as a state of being complete, in an unbroken condition, or whole.

The word comes from the Latin word *integratis* which means entire or whole. *Integrate* and *integration* come from the same root and their meaning related to the combining of disparate elements into a harmonious entity. The connection of integrity to an idea of something whole or entire is very relevant to this discussion. It implies that when we act with integrity, we assume responsibility for our character - our entire character - including the parts of it that we don't like, our unconscious side, our weaknesses, our limitations and the recognition that sometime we fail to live up to certain ideals. To truly act with integrity means that it is impossible to deny or repress the difficult nature of these issues.

Integrity is also connected to our ethical capacity. Our ethical capacity is not a product of some developmental achievement that we acquire and then have for the rest of our lives. Our ethical capacity involves an ongoing process of strengthening our ability to make ethical decisions.

Stephen Greisdorf, a leader in thinking about ethics in business suggests that building our ethical capacity involves four elements - *listening, reflecting, discussing* and *engaging*. They embrace the need for both an internal and an external orientation, that is . . . . they reflect the need to be actively engaged in an inner dialogue around the unconscious part of our ourselves, personal values, and our own integrity; and in outer dialogues with others. This engagement requires a certain degree of risk and vulnerability, and a tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty and anxiety.

Ethics reflections are not static endeavours but are dynamic and ever present. Our ethical capacity, like muscles, must be exercised or else they go flabby. We cannot be complacent or cavalier.

North American society is at a cross road. Our organizations, businesses and government are in deep ethical waters. If we support the premise that communities and organizations develop much in the same way as individuals, then some new tactic is needed to restore trust and to raise ethical consciousness - one that support ethical reflection in an open and non-punitive way and the cultivation of integrity in our public institutions. We must vigilant and be prepared to walk the talk. It is not enough to set the rules or to enforce the rules through punishment, or humiliation via some public enquiry. An attitude of punishment seems to only promote the furthering of defensive reactions and efforts to pressure reputations.