Strengthening Ethical Decision Making

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Consider this question: Aside from acknowledging its obvious importance, how seriously do you take ethics? Is ethics talked about within your organization? Is it a window dressing or a core ingredient?

As CEO, you set the ethical tone for your organization. It is up to you to ensure that an ethics-focused culture is interwoven into your organization's policies, clinical and administrative practices, and performance measures. Your ethical leadership is central not only to your organization's quality of care but also to your success as a leader. Patients expect it, your staff needs it, and regulators demand it.

Establishing an Ethical Culture

An ethical culture consists of two parts: (1) shared values based on ethical guidelines and practices, such as a mission statement, code of ethics, values statement, and procedures, and (2) an infrastructure of ethical resources that decision makers can turn to when the guidelines are not enough, when there is uncertainty about the proper ethical approach. Within healthcare organizations, it is easy to assume that ethical standards that guide clinical decision making are enough. But we must remember that all clinical decisions are made within the context of the organization as a whole. In order to support ethical clinical behavior, the organization must have processes that help guide administrative decisions as well.

But establishing an ethical culture is not only about formal processes and written guidelines. It is also about how you model ethical behavior to others on your staff. When you encourage staff to participate in a discussion of an ethics-related issue, you are educating them about the importance of ethics in the decision-making process.

Becoming Ethically "Attuned"

Strengthening your ethical decision making starts with becoming ethically "attuned"—learning to recognize the ethical ramifications of an issue. For example, imagine that you are the CEO of a large metropolitan hospital that owns three outpatient clinics. Two of the clinics have good patient mix and volume and are financially successful. But the remaining clinic is in a low-income community; it sees a high volume of patients but is losing money rapidly, mostly because its patients are often uninsured and unable to pay. From a business perspective, the situation looks clear: The unsuccessful clinic should be shut down. But before making such a decision, the ethically attuned leader will note the ethical ramifications of closing the clinic in addition to the financial and legal ramifications: Does the organization have an ethical responsibility to the community being served? How badly needed is the clinic in the community, and how would the closure affect it? How does the decision to close it correspond to the organization's mission?

For many ethical conflicts, there is no one right answer; there is, rather, a range of right answers. Determining the ethically appropriate response often starts with asking questions. Does the decision process take into consideration the values of all parties affected by the decision? On what basis do you prioritize the competing values? Could you publicly defend the decision? Does the decision mesh with your mission and value statements?

Drawing on Ethics Resources

It is important for CEOs to realize that they are not alone in determining the ethical response to an issue. Just as we call legal counsel to advise us on matters beyond our knowledge, CEOs can bring in ethics experts, such as an outside consultant or the chair of the organization's ethics committee. There is also a growing body of ethics literature that can provide valuable guidance.

ACHE provides a number of ethics resources that you can draw on as well. ACHE's *Code of Ethics, Ethical Policy Statements,* and *Ethics Self-Assessment* are all available on **ache.org**; ACHE also offers an annual two-day ethics seminar and features an ethics column in *Healthcare Executive* magazine. Currently, ACHE is developing an ethics toolkit that will provide additional ethics resources to healthcare executives, including a step-by-step process for ethical decision making.

Being an ethical CEO is not simply a matter of doing what is right, although that is at the core of all ethical decisions. Rather, it is also an essential part of your ability to deliver high-quality care. Demonstrating ethical reasoning can help you build a foundation of mutual trust and respect with physicians and nurses, increase patient satisfaction, improve employee loyalty, and enhance your organization's public image. Sound ethical practices may result in fewer lawsuits and fewer ethics violations, giving ethical behavior a financial justification as well. Realizing these benefits, however, depends on your commitment to ethical leadership.

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