Are Ethics Guiding Your Workplace?

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Sanctions under the HIPAA regulations mean serious financial consequences for healthcare professionals who release protected health information to others without following proper disclosure protocols. But HIM professionals should not be motivated by fear of financial consequences alone. Our ethics should motivate us because patient confidentiality has always been at the forefront of our profession.

Following the Code

AHIMA's Code of Ethics states, "HIM professionals promote and protect the confidentiality and security of health records and health information...HIM professionals comply with all laws, regulations, and standards governing the practice of health information management." [1]

AHIMA's Code of Ethics fundamentally guides our decisions amid the stringent sanctions the HIPAA regulations impose. Professional integrity, not financial consequences, should consistently motivate us to do the right thing. HIM practitioners have known all along what all healthcare practitioners have recently become more acutely aware of in the advent of HIPAA—the importance of protecting patient privacy. Organizations are already disciplining staff due to infractions of the HIPAA privacy standards. The role of ethics is even more important than ever.

Does your organization have a code of ethics to create a sound corporate culture and promote the practice of ethical behavior? Due to recent widely reported financial misconduct of large corporations, many organizations are strengthening their codes of ethics. The corporate culture and ethics of an organization conveys its expectations, describes its values, and raises awareness about conduct among employees.

When Good People Do Unethical Things

What causes unethical behavior in good people? According to Michael Daigneault, ethics expert and former president of the Ethics Resource Center, when the following circumstances occur, unethical behavior is also more likely to occur:

- Success is defined almost exclusively in monetary terms
- Decision makers do not possess the proper information or means with which to make a good decision
- Incentives are given to do whatever it takes to succeed
- There isn't enough time to identify the real problem that should be addressed [2]

We often have to make choices between competing interests, such as following coding rules or reimbursement guidelines. These situations pose the greatest potential for unethical behavior.

Sometimes we compromise our ethics by rationalizing our actions. Daigneault named eight rationalizations for ethical compromise:

- I have to cut corners to meet my goals
- I lack the time/resources to do what is right
- My peers expect me to act this way
- My superiors want results, not excuses
- I don't think it is really wrong or illegal
- Others would think that it is a good choice
- No one will ever know the difference
- I am afraid to do what I know is right [3]

Distinguishing Among Values, Morals, Ethics

Because all individuals have differing experiences, we may make unique distinctions among the terms ethics, values, and morals. Ethics professional Frank Navran, principal consultant for the Ethics Resource Center, defines them as follows:

Values are fundamental beliefs. They are the principles we use to determine what is right, good, and just. They also provide guidance for determining right from wrong and good from bad. Values encompass the beliefs that define importance and worth.

Morals are values people attribute to a system of beliefs that help individuals define right from wrong and good from bad. These values typically derive their authority from something outside the individual, such as society or the government. Morals may vary from one society to another and change over time within a given society. According to Navran, in the business world, people may avoid framing their ethical choices in moral terms out of fear that they may offend someone whose moral frame of reference is different from theirs.

Ethics is the study of what is understood to be good, just behavior and how people judge that behavior. When an individual acts in ways that are consistent with our moral values, we characterize that as acting ethically. When an individual's actions are not congruent with our moral values, we view this as acting unethically. [4]

HIM professionals have always protected patient confidentiality, and it is up to us to do what is right based on ethical values, not sanctions alone.

Notes

1. AHIMA. "AHIMA Code of Ethics" (October 4, 1998).
2. Daigneault, Michael. "Ethics and Professionalism: Why Good People Do Bad Things." The Ethics Resource Center, 1996. Available at www.ethics.org/resources/article_detail.cfm?ID=30.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Navran, Frank. "Ask the Expert." The Ethics Resource Center, 2003. Available at www.ethics.org/ask_e4.html#.

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